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HUGH MACMILLAN



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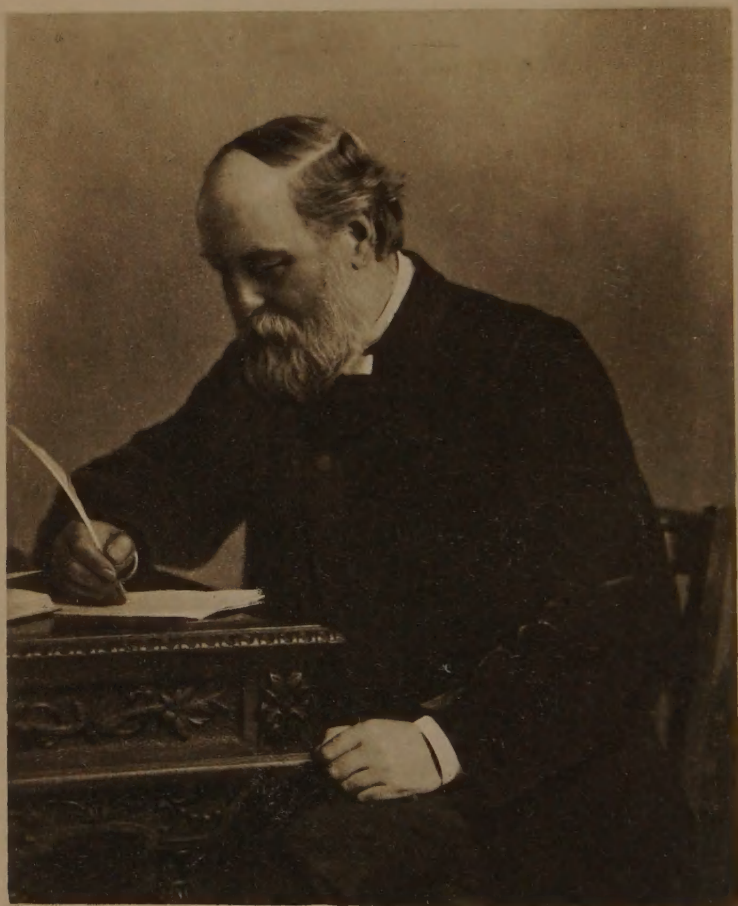


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THE TOUCH OF GOD

And Other Sermons

BY

HUGH MACMILLAN,

D.D. (EDIN. & GLAS.), LL.D., F.R.S.E., ETC.

*Author of "Bible Teachings in Nature," "The True
Vine," "Two Worlds are Ours," etc., etc.*



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In consequence of the lamented death of the author while this volume was in preparation the proof sheets have not had the benefit of his revision, a task which has been undertaken by his son.

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THE TOUCH OF GOD

THE TOUCH OF GOD

“And the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with Him.”—GEN. xxxii. 25.

THERE are forces in nature which are terribly deadly if fully exposed. They must be concealed and mixed with other innocuous substances in order to be safely used or transmitted. The power of dynamite must be wrapped up in a kind of white sand if it is to be conveyed without danger. The electricity which we employ for lighting purposes or for motive power, must be sheathed in a non-conducting material in order that we may be protected from its violence. The astronomer cannot gaze upon the sun, without having his eyes shaded by a smoked glass. And so with all the other forces of nature. As we protect our children in the nursery from the fire in the grate by a guard; so we, who are only children of a larger growth, must

have a guard put before the terrible fires and powers of the earth to defend us from their death-dealing violence. God in nature is verily a God that hideth Himself. Clouds and darkness are round about His throne. The full thunder of His power what heart can comprehend? What being can stand before His unveiled majesty? When He discloses Himself in all His power, His voice breaketh the cedars of Lebanon; He divideth the flames of fire; He shaketh the wilderness; He discovereth the forests. And as in nature, so in the human world. Moses wished to see the face of God, but he was told that no one could look upon God and live; and therefore he was put in the cleft of the rock, and shaded from the ineffable glory, and God passed by and he saw only His back-parts. God is said to be a sun; but He is also at the same time said to be a shield. The fierce torrid sun of the East requires the screen of a cloud to mitigate its intolerable glare, else it would smite man and beast with the fiery sword of its sunstroke to death. And so God is our sun and shield; we cannot see God our sun without the intervention and safeguard of God our shield. When God appeared to the Israelites in the wilderness in the awful thunders and lightnings of Sinai, neither man nor beast could come near the burning

mountain, or touch it except at the risk of instant death. They therefore stood afar off and said unto Moses, "Speak thou with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." Sometimes He laid bare His holy arm; and then what terrible works He wrought among the sons of men! Sometimes He came out from behind the veil of His providence, and smote men with the fierceness of His anger. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram profaned His service, and fire issued from His presence and burnt them up. The men of Bethshemesh looked into the ark of the Lord, and they were smitten with a great slaughter on account of their irreverence. Uzzah stretched forth his hand to steady the ark while the cart that bore it was jolted on the rough path, as David was transporting it from Kirjath-jearim to Jerusalem; and like a thunderbolt out of a blue sky, the wrath of God struck him dead instantaneously. And here in the text Jacob wrestled with the Angel of God at Peniel, and the single touch of the Divine visitant put the hollow of his thigh out of joint. Jacob was thankful that he had seen God face to face, and his life was preserved. He was astonished at his immunity; but he did not escape scatheless, for he halted upon his thigh, and during all the rest of his life, he pursued his pilgrim way

with a limping gait, because of this one close contact with the Divine Being.

There is a remarkable old Greek fable, that Jupiter, the chief of the gods, loved a beautiful mortal woman called Semele. Juno, his proud consort, was filled with jealousy, and asked her rival to express to her husband her wish that he should appear to her, not in the humble guise in which she was accustomed to see him, but in all the full power and majesty of his divine nature. The god was reluctant to grant her request, knowing the danger to her frail mortal nature. But she prevailed upon him; and accordingly he manifested himself to her as the dread god of the thunderstorm, and immediately the lightning consumed the unfortunate Semele to ashes. This fable was used by the Greek poets to express the penalty which the Divine presence inflicts upon a child of earth. The fate of Semele was regarded as a type of what must inevitably happen if ever the celestial life should intrude upon the lower human life. What was a fable in Greek literature is an awful reality in the Bible. This infinite holiness of the Divine life cannot come into contact with our sinful flesh and blood, without painfully wounding it. God's eyes are as a flame of fire, and they must shrivel up whatever impure thing they look

upon, as fire consumes dross or chaff. Manoah, the father of Samson, expressed his deep conviction of this, when the Angel of the Lord ascended before him in the flame of fire that arose from the altar of sacrifice, and he and his wife fell on their faces to the ground, and Manoah said, "We shall surely die because we have seen God."

It was necessary, therefore, that if God should hold communion with man, He should veil His Godhead. It was necessary that Jesus should empty Himself of His divine glories and come into our nature. The vain imagination of the Lycaonians has been realised in our case, and God is come down to us in the likeness of man. The simple-minded shepherds of Palestine who went down during the famine to Egypt to buy corn there, were filled with awe when they were ushered into the presence of the great ruler of the land; but when they discovered in the mighty potentate their long-lost brother Joseph their terror was dispelled. And so the overwhelming brightness of the Godhead is softened in Him who is our brother-born, who knows all the things of a man, being made in all things partaker of our nature. In answer to the deep anxieties and ardent yearnings of our hearts, His gentle voice replies, "It is I, be not afraid."

“Fear thou not, for I am with thee ; be not dismayed, for I am thy God.” And in this way has come to pass that wonder of wonders, that most stupendous of all miracles, that the course of the world was not interrupted by the bodily presence of the Creator ; that God should have walked among men, and the life of man should have run on in the old channels. So it has come to pass that men saw God like the elders of Israel on the Mount, and did eat and drink and carried on the ordinary actions of life, undisturbed by His presence. So God in Christ Jesus has come nearer to us in that still small voice than in thunder-roar or ocean-tempest. The Divine presence is forced upon our thoughts during the storm, and it appals and stuns us, but it steals into our hearts in the gentle tenderness of Jesus Christ.

Our Lord took upon Him not the nature of angels, but the flesh and blood of humanity ; and in that nature He attained a glorious victory for us over all the principalities and powers of evil. But He did not obtain that victory except at a great cost. He halted upon His thigh all His days. He was the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief as if there was no other. He was the Prince of sufferers, crowned with the crown of thorns. The Godhead could not be associated with the

manhood in Him, without the flesh paying the penalty of the awful association. Many think that His Godhead enabled Him to endure His trials and sorrows so lightly that He hardly felt them. But on the contrary, it made the pressure of His sufferings all the more grievous. The higher the nature the more sensitive it is to pain, and the nature of Jesus was the highest of all, and therefore He felt His pains and sorrows more acutely than ordinary human beings, to the degree that His nature was elevated above theirs by His divinity. And how was the sense of sin in Him who was made sin, yea, a curse for us, intensified by the union in Him of the pure and holy God who cannot look upon sin! What Jesus suffered from the temptation of Satan in the wilderness, and from the endurance of the contradiction of sinners against Himself, no tongue can tell. We cannot comprehend to what degree the pressure of His Divine nature must have overborne the weakness of the flesh with which it was linked. How it must have aggravated every pang and privation and evil! The Divine in Him gave to them all an element of infinitude and eternity. They were finite sufferings endured by an infinite Being in a form of flesh, and therefore we hear Him saying to every passer by, "Behold, and see if there be any sorrow

like unto My sorrow!" It pleased the Lord to bruise Him, because He was Emmanuel—God with us. It was not an arbitrary, capricious will of God to bruise Him. The close contact of the Godhead with the human flesh must of necessity have bruised Him. It was inevitable. We get an awful glimpse of this shrinking of the sinew in the Garden of Gethsemane, when His soul was exceedingly sorrowful even unto death, and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground, and He cried out in deepest anguish, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me." We get a still more awful glimpse of it in the darkness and desolation of the Cross, in which suffering had reached its utmost, and there was no further possibility of endurance, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" The Divine nature associated with the human nature, even in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, must inflict the terrible penalty of pain and suffering, like the association of flame with human flesh. And He bore forever the marks of that terrible conflict and association; for He is on the throne of the universe still a Lamb as it had been slain, exhibiting amid the glory of heaven, the wounds of the Cross, the shrinking of the sinew from the terrible struggle.

In Jacob's own case the halting walk was the picture or emblem of what his whole life was, a discipline through suffering, a victory through pain and loss. He won the birthright from his brother ; he obtained the blessing at his father's knee ; but that birthright was not a birthright of ease and prosperity and earthly happiness ; the blessing did not make his lot a privileged and favoured lot, exempt from the trials and troubles of life. On the contrary, it brought him into a closer relation with God, in order that he might be redeemed from the evil that was in him, by the flame of God's purity. God was to him a consuming fire, burning out the dross of his nature through sore suffering. He did not get the victory upon easy terms ; he did not obtain the blessing for nothing. His heart and his flesh often failed him, because of the greatness of his manifold afflictions ; and he expressed all the weariness and sorrow and anguish of his life, when he said to Pharaoh, " Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been." Esau prospered in this world, and had an easy and pleasant life, because he was a prince of this world ; Jacob had the heart of a pilgrim, and the powers of the world to come entering into his nature made his pilgrim lot and halting step seem the sign of a broken and wasted life.

And as the association of heaven was thus linked with sore pain and privation in the case of Jacob, so is it in the case of every human being who is called and chosen of God. The touch of the Divine that draws him aside from the crowd and consecrates him to a higher service, wounds and makes the sinew to shrink. The fellowship of God must be to flesh and blood a fellowship of suffering. Even though veiled and mitigated by the human nature of Christ, the insufferable glory does not leave our frail humanity scathless when it holds communion with it. Isaiah saw the vision of God in the Temple in a luminous cloud, obscured by the smoke of the fragrant incense, and yet he was filled with profound terror, and cried out, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." Peter got a vision of the same glory when he trembled and exclaimed beside his nets at the Sea of Galilee, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The disciples were amazed as they beheld that glory on the way up to Jerusalem from Cæsarea Philippi; and as they followed they were afraid. The multitude that came with swords and staves to apprehend Him in the Garden of Gethsemane fell back to the

ground, awestruck by the sudden glory of the Godhead flashing out upon them. On the way to Damascus the glory of God, even in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom Saul persecuted, shone upon the persecutor with a brightness exceeding the noonday splendour of the sun, so that it blinded him for three days, and he groped in the darkness, and was led about by other men. It was in this way, too, that, in the vision of His resurrection splendour at Patmos, He caused the beloved disciple to fall down at His feet as one dead. The flesh of sinful man must be made to shrink before the Divine glory, even though tempered in the person of Jesus Christ. Every creature must have this feeling in the presence of its Creator. And the higher and purer the creature the more sensitive to the pain does it become. For you notice that it is ever the holiest saints that have the deepest sense of sin and unworthiness before God. And even the angels before that celestial fire of glory veil their faces with their wings. Even they cannot behold the face of God in its full effulgence: and though they have never sinned nor fallen, He chargeth them with folly, so unutterable in comparison is His own perfection.

The blessing of God is indeed ever the

blessing of sorrow. He gives to each believer, as He gave to Christ Himself, a cross. It was said by the pagan poets that madness was the penalty which Hercules paid for being so near the gods. And it is true indeed that those whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. Their sufferings are the marks of the Lord Jesus, the wounds of His Cross, the jewelled stars which mark out the nobility of heaven. If they have diviner joys, they must have deeper woes than other people; if their peace passeth all understanding, with their sorrows no stranger can intermeddle. The divine that is in them makes sin more abhorrent to them, and pain and trial more poignant to their sensitive nature. Many and special are the afflictions of the righteous, just because of this awful indwelling of the Godhead in them. What are the trials of Christians but just the assurance that a heavenly visitant has come into their life to wrestle with them, and that flesh and blood cannot bear the Divine touch without the shrinking of the sinew? The burning coal that the seraph takes from off the altar scorches the lips upon which it is laid, and which have to speak in words of flame that consume the speaker. The angel's visit to the

Virgin Mary at Nazareth was the foreboding of the sorrow and the shame that were to come to her in virtue of that honour, the sword that was to pierce her own soul also. Paul was transported to the third heaven and heard unutterable things, but he had a thorn in the flesh in consequence to wound and mortify him. And so it must ever be. God cannot come near us, even to bless us, without His presence shutting out the sunshine and casting a shadow over us. The flame of His holiness cannot touch our frames without shrivelling them up, even when it comes to purify us. It must be a cross that lifts us to heaven. There is ever an effort to success alike in the natural and spiritual sphere. We hardly ever get what we have striven hard for in the exact way that we had expected, and without any drawback. To the exaltation of feeling and the quickening of the mind, there is annexed the penalty of the weariness of the body. The gains of life are accompanied by the inevitable losses. Connected with every wrestling with the higher world, there is always the disability of the shrunken sinew.

And what is the reason of this? Why do those who live without God prosper and be at ease, and know nothing of such

pains and penalties? And why are those who have close communion with Him afflicted with peculiar afflictions, and find that fellowship with Him means only fellowship in suffering? Is it not in the first instance to humble them? Jacob might have been exalted in his own esteem when he prevailed even with God; but against this deadly spiritual peril he was guarded by the touch of the angel's hand, which made his sinew to shrink, and showed him his own weakness, and that he owed his victory not to his own powers, but to his Divine antagonist's indulgence and help. And Paul was in danger of being high-minded when he was so favoured of God as to be admitted into the secret place of the Most High, but the messenger of Satan was sent to buffet him, and so to save him from presumption and pride. And is it not equally true that many of the Christian's trials are preventing mercies, sent to guard him against the self-sufficiency which the special favour of God is apt to produce? Then, too, the discipline of the shrunken sinew is meant to purify and ennoble the soul. Jacob was a grander man when he halted upon his thigh than when, hale and able-bodied, he wrested the birth-right from his brother by craftiness. There is no more sordidness or double-dealing about

him now. Jacob the deceiver becomes the Prince of God, and acts henceforward as a prince. He passed down from Peniel a new man, with a face from which all the cunning and worldliness had disappeared and which shone with the beauty of heaven in the light of the morning sun. And so it is with the Christian still. Wounded in the flesh he is exalted in spirit, like a vine that has its inferior parts, its tendrils and foliage and branches, pruned away, in order that its nobler part, the cluster of grapes that yields the life-blood of the plant, may be produced and developed. Clearer insight and nobler Christian vigour, and more vivid spiritual fellowship, and increased powers of usefulness come through the maiming of the outer man; and it is felt that it is better to enter into the kingdom of heaven halt and maimed, than having the body complete to be cast out. If physical strength withers under the angel's touch, and worldly good consumes away under his breath, let us gladly pay that small cost of our ennobling, and learn with the Apostle Paul to glory even in our infirmities, as the soldier glories in his battle-wounds. Let us rejoice that we are accounted worthy not only to believe in Jesus, but to suffer for His sake. For it is the highest exaltation of our nature, the culminating

honour of our life, to be crucified with Christ. It is because we belong to a higher life than that of this world that we suffer in this way, that through our very halting we may advance more rapidly and boldly along the shining path of the just to higher service and nobler reward.

The last touch of the angel makes not merely the sinew to shrink, but the whole flesh to crumble into dust ; for flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. What is death itself but the last touch of God in this world to purify us from the dregs of our sins, and to ennoble us for the inheritance of the saints in light? You have noticed how the humblest face in death gets an exalted look from this contact with the spiritual and the eternal. The flesh shrinks and shrivels, the warm flush of life and beauty disappear, but on the pale marble face is set the seal of God's glory, and the mortal puts on immortality. And in that eternal world to which we shall be called there shall be no more struggle, no more shrinking of the sinew, no more pain or sorrow or death, for we shall be perfectly adapted to our life and our environment. We shall be able to gaze upon the brightness of that uncreated glory upon which none can look and live, for His name shall be on our

forehead. We shall see Jesus as He is, for we shall be like Him. Light can dwell with light without quenching it, and fire can dwell with fire without burning it. And we shall see God and live for ever, for we shall be pure as Christ is pure, and perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.

IN THE COOL OF THE DAY

IN THE COOL OF THE DAY

“And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.”—GEN. iii. 8.

THE picture which the sacred writer draws of the primitive home of man is so pure, so calm, so beautiful, so unlike this troublesome world, that it touches the deepest chords of our hearts. We somehow feel as if we ourselves, not in the persons of our representatives, but in our own experience, had once known its beauty and sunshine, and were thence cast out to wander in the wilderness which now surrounds us. We know in how dark a cloud sin descended upon that innocent abode, overwhelming all its brightness, and marring God's perfect work. Man had rebelled against the Divine goodness, and the world of nature was no longer in harmony with him. He had brought down ruin upon himself, and he reflected that ruin upon the world associated

with him. Adam sinned, and Eden broke up as an image on the bosom of a lake into which a stone has been thrown. Our first parents were still in the garden, but everything was changed to them, for they were changed themselves.

In this tragic scene Adam and Eve conjured up, in the darkness caused by their sin, a dreadful image of an avenging Deity; and from this self-created delusion they fled and hid themselves among the trees of the garden. But not in such a dreadful form did God actually appear to them. We are simply told that after they had sinned, and their eyes were opened to see the bitter consequences of their sin, "they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." Could anything be calmer and gentler than this description of God's revelation of Himself? That expression, "in the cool of the day," is not a mere rhetorical ornament to give picturesqueness to the description, but is in reality intended to serve a most important purpose. It contains within it the germ of the whole gospel of redemption. It is a picture painted as an illuminated letter at the commencement of the first page of the history of fallen man—a picture of the patient long-suffering, the tender mercy, and exhaustless love of God, who has no pleasure

in the death of him that dieth, but rather that all should turn unto Him and live. It is meant to reveal to man, at the very beginning, immediately after his transgression, in full view of the glorious Being whom he had offended, the great design of his redemption. The whole Bible is one continuous, ever-varying comment upon it.

We are accustomed to think that the gospel of grace is a Divine afterthought, as though in stern justice God at first delivered up our first parents to the punishment of pain and shame, and at length, touched by pity, had put forth a hand to rescue and restore them. But known unto God are all His works from the beginning. He is the Omega as well as the Alpha of all things. Just as, in the sin of Adam, we see the root sin of humanity, out of and according to the type of which all other sins have grown, so we are justified in seeking in this first manifestation of an offended God to our sinful first parents the root and the type of all God's dealings with man in all after ages. He to whom a thousand years are as one day, and one day as a thousand years, ran through man's prospective history at a single glance, while He walked in the garden in the cool of the day. His plan was formed, His covenant was ordered in all things and

sure. Through the long vista of revolving years, through the long aisle of intervening ages, the altar of the Cross was seen, and upon it the great sufferer, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world; and to fallen, apostate, self-ruined man was the promise made that the seed of the woman should bruise the head of the serpent.

When our first parents sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, God did not at once inflict the sentence of doom which He had threatened. "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die," was the sword suspended over their heads, but it did not fall at once, and cut them off in their transgression. God did not rush immediately upon them when their eyes were opened and put them to death. When they were trembling with fear on account of what they had done, and dreading its awful consequences; when they were overwhelmed with feelings of shame and confusion; that would not have been an opportune moment for God to manifest Himself to them. He waited till the sun was about to set below the purple west, and the gathering shadows were darkening the bowers of Eden, before He intervened. He wished Adam and Eve to recover in some degree from their panic, and to regain some measure of composure and self-control. And in this

treatment of them we recognise that wonderful forbearance which is so characteristic of God. He deals with every sinner as He dealt with our first parents. All His treatment of the human race has been of a piece with His treatment of its progenitors. He does not instantly punish every transgression. He does not send thunder and lightning down from heaven to destroy the transgressor in the very act of sinning against Him. He waits till the cool of the day before He comes to reckon with the sinner. He allows him time to recover from his confusion, to cool down from the agitation of his passion, and to realise his situation. God waited for a hundred and twenty long years, while Noah was building his ark, and warning the wicked generations of the impending doom of the world, before He sent the flood to destroy it; and when all was ready and the animals were all safe in the ark, He waited yet seven other days before the floods of vengeance were released; and these seven days were days of grace, like the days of grace which are allowed in business before the payment of a bill or a premium is demanded. And so He waits still. He waits, to speak of Him as of one of ourselves, till His indignation has calmed down, and He can treat the case with the considerateness of

perfect justice. Oh, the wonderful patience of God! How unlike human conduct! How high above our thoughts and ways are His thoughts and ways! And when He came down in this cool, deliberate fashion, He meant to teach us a lesson and give us an example. He meant to show to us by His own conduct that it is necessary to pause before allowing our anger against any one who has injured or wronged us to have full sway; to interpose an interval of patience and recollection and forbearance between the wrong-doing and the bringing of it to account, for our own sake, as well as for the sake of the transgressor. Later on, the inspired writer said, "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath." He who gave the precept Himself acted upon it from the beginning. Ere the sun descended, and another day was finished, God came down to speak with our first parents about their sin, and to prepare a way for forgiveness and reconciliation. He waited till the cool of the day, but no longer. He waited long enough to let His patience have its perfect work, and fulfil its beneficent purpose, but not so long as to cherish resentment beyond the falling of the shades of evening, when the darkness of the night should be the symbol of His implacability.

God used the gentle and humanising in-

fluences of nature in her tenderest hour to help Him in His work of grace. Man's redemption was to begin with the redemption of nature. By tilling the ground, by the husbandry of nature, he was to be prepared for the husbandry of grace. With God's gracious purpose the hour was in beautiful harmony. It was the sabbath of the day, when heaven melted into earth, leaving on all the landscape a softness like the atmosphere of dreams. What can be lovelier than an Eastern eve, when the burning sun has set, and instead of crimson fire consuming everything, there are only in the sky crimson clouds that seem as soft and cool as rose-leaves! A gentle breeze blows over the earth; a delicious coolness comes to the fevered brow and the parched frame, and a Divine peace seems to brood upon the soul, and a tenderness is diffused through the air, hushing all discordant noises, and bringing out into musical loudness the harmonious sounds of nature. God's voice in a world of sin and misery still blesses the cool hour of the day. He seems still to walk at that time among the trees of the garden. The hour once sacred to His presence still keeps itself calmer from the touch of evil, the holiest hour of all the twenty-four hours of the day. It is the hour when toil ceases, when the

plough is left in the furrow and the ploughman homeward plods his weary way, and innocent things seek their natural rest, and birds creep beneath their leafy covering, and even the flowers close their eyes and fold up their leaves in slumber. Think of what the cool of the day must have been in Eden when the fragrance of the blossoms was ascending like incense to God, and the twilight shadows rested like a blessing upon the trees, and nature laid its soft, cool hand like a mother's upon the hot, fevered pulses of our sorely-stricken first parents!

And what better time could God have chosen to reveal His scheme of grace, manifesting the beauty of His holiness and the tenderness of His love, than when Adam and Eve were feeling the holy aspirations of the cool vesper, the soothing gentleness of the serene twilight, and heaven seemed to come down to earth and melt their hearts to humbleness, meekness, and contrition! God has always suited His mode of revelation not only to the needs but even to the circumstances of men. He could not speak words of peace and hope to those who at the time were on the rack of anxiety and trouble. He must calm and soothe them first to receive His inspiring message. Even so He could not open up high hopes and bright expectations

to the prophet who cast himself in abject fear and profound self-abasement at His feet, like a grovelling slave at the feet of an oriental despot. He commanded him to stand up on his feet, and then in that manly attitude proper to a being made in the image of God, and chosen to hold fellowship with Him, God would speak to him to some purpose. Not when the hungry multitude who had followed Jesus out of the towns of Galilee into the wilderness, were weary and footsore, and could scarcely stand upright on account of their fatigue and exhaustion, did Jesus distribute to them the loaves and fishes of the miraculous feast. He commanded them first to sit down on the green grass in convenient ranks, and then and thus rest themselves; and in this comfortable and refreshing posture He ministered to their necessities. And so God waited till the cool of the day, till the natural beauty of the deepening twilight had infused something of its own tenderness and peace into the agitated hearts of Adam and Eve, before He came to talk to them of the glorious promise of redemption. It was God's way from the beginning; a habit which He carried with Him all through His dealings with the sons of men.

Most justly might God have blotted out

human existence from the universe for ever, after the experiment of His creation had so miserably failed. But He elected to spare man, to look pitifully upon Him, and to open up through grace a nobler destiny for him. Man sinned, but God brought forth a higher righteousness out of his sin. Man rebelled, but God brought out of his rebellion a nobler order and freedom. Man died; the sentence was executed though his life was spared; he sank into a condition that was a true death, but God ordained that his immortal life should spring out of his death. The promise of redemption rose like the first star of evening on the darkness of our first parents. It became the morning star of the world's hope. A soft light of heavenly pity and love shone down on the night of sorrow. It prophesied of the dawn into which it should fade, when the Sun of Righteousness, the sun of the paradise restored, should again rise upon the world with healing in its wings.

He who came in the cool of the day to deal with our first parents, comes in the same gentle, considerate way to deal with us, that His gentleness may make us great, and His goodness may lead us to repentance. So long as we think only of the Divine greatness, against which we have sinned, there is danger lest terror should paralyse

our souls, and we should shrink from Him, or cringe before Him with the abject spirit of a slave. But when we realise the Divine gentleness, and feel that God is drawing near to us in tender sympathy, and encouraging us as dear children to seek from Him mercy and pardon and grace to help us, the filial spirit which His fatherliness inspires fills our heart with a joyous sense of freedom and enlargement. "But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us." We have sinned against God, but He comes down in the cool of the day, when He can say, "Fury is not in Me"; "Though I was angry, yet Mine anger is passed away." He waits to be gracious to us. He says, "In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee." Let our tryst with God in the cool of the day lead us back from our sin to the fountain of life and blessedness, and produce in us that softening and renewing of the hard and stony heart, without which we cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Let the sick and the sorrowful and the sinful gather round the Lord Jesus Christ when the sun is setting, that He may heal them all.

THE RIGHT TREATMENT OF IDOLS



THE RIGHT TREATMENT OF IDOLS

“And Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.”—GEN. xxxv. 4.

THE descendants of Nahor, Abraham's brother, who still lingered in the place from which Abraham had departed on his pilgrimage of faith, retained the old local religion. The god of Nahor was a different divinity from the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Doubtless this was one of the ancestral nature-gods which before the call of Abraham were worshipped by the whole family of Terah. Most of the domestics of Jacob came, along with his wives, from the country of Laban, and they carried with them the images of this Nahorite worship to their new home. We find that Rachel had stolen her father's teraphim, which he had regarded as gods, and consulted probably for oracular purposes. And we know that his daughter set a high value upon these images, from the precautions which she adopted to hide them

when her tent was searched. The household of Jacob practised this combination of image-worship with the patriarchal religion; and Jacob, owing to his long familiarity with it, and not realising its pernicious influence, allowed it to go on. His love for Rachel had doubtless led him weakly to tolerate her teraphim. But the terrible tragedy connected with his daughter Dinah, opened his eyes to the state of his household, and showed him that there were passions existing in it as savage and irreligious as those of the heathen. His moral sense was quickened and enlightened by the deplorable consequences of his sons' fanaticism, which made their religion offensive to the surrounding heathen and imperilled the existence of the covenant family. He roused himself therefore at once from his easy toleration, and in preparation for going up to worship at Bethel, the place of the outward revelation of God, he sought by an act of repentance in the most decided manner to purify his home from the works of superstition and idolatry that had contaminated it. He demanded from his wives and servants a complete, solemn, and public renunciation of image-worship.

This revival of religious feeling in the heart of Jacob communicated itself to the inmates

of his house, and therefore at his request they gave up at once not only their strange gods but even all their personal ornaments, the earrings which probably bore upon them, as was the custom, the symbols of their idol-worship, and were used as amulets or charms. He uttered no threats, he used no angry words against the possessors of these images. Calmly and dispassionately at the warning word of God, without any fanatical violence, he went and hid them under an oak which was by Shechem. He buried them as objects worthy of respectful treatment, because of the veneration with which they had at one time been regarded, under one of the oaks or terebinths which formed part of a sacred grove or sanctuary in the land of his sojourn. He did not throw out the idols upon the rubbish-heap, to be the scorn of every passer-by, but he restored them to the place to which they belonged; he put them under the shade of one of those magnificent trees to which the reverence of ages had clung, and where men in tree-worship groped after God in the darkness of nature if haply they might find Him. We are told that it was under an oak that Jacob buried Deborah, the aged nurse of his mother Rebecca, and called it Allon-Bachuth, the oak of weeping. We are further told that at a later period Joshua wrote the words of

the law upon a great monumental stone, and set it up under an oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord at Shechem. With something of the same reverence that inspired both of these acts, the patriarch hid the gods of his household, perhaps in the same spot where Joshua had set up his stone of witness. He buried Deborah with affectionate sorrow because of her long and faithful service in his family. He buried the idols of his household in a seemly way as he would have buried a dead human body, because of the old associations of sacredness that had gathered around them.

Now we may be sure that the Bible does not mention this unexpected mode of disposing of his domestic idols without some important purpose. It would be a comparatively trifling piece of information for the dignity of Scripture to impart if there was nothing more than the mere literal fact that Jacob hid the idols under an oak that was at Shechem. Scripture always means something. It is not a book of mere words, but of great ideas speaking for all time. And the lesson of the incident to us, as to all human beings throughout all time, is this—that whatever has been the object of worship should be treated tenderly and buried reverently when it is overgrown or discarded, unless it was

used directly for evil and cruel purposes. Jacob had realised the vanity of image-worship. He came to believe that idols were simply objects made by human hands, destitute not only of power, but even of any real existence. They had no longer any hold upon his imagination, no influence upon his life. He was in no danger to his spiritual well-being from them. He could therefore afford to treat them with a kind of reverent pity as the dry, empty husks from which the kernel had been extracted. Had it been otherwise, then we may be sure that he would not have dealt so considerately with them. He would have acted as King Hezekiah acted when he destroyed the brazen serpent which Moses had used in the miraculous healing of the Israelites in the wilderness, and which had been removed to and preserved in Jerusalem. This object had been converted into an idol for popular adoration. Incense was offered to it, and it was confounded with the general image-worship of Baal which had wrought such moral havoc throughout the land. With a remarkable courage Hezekiah broke in pieces this sacred symbol of bygone times, undeterred by its many solemn associations. Although made by Moses at the command of God Himself, and although the very sight of

it had once saved multitudes from death, it had now become a curse to the people on account of the blind, superstitious reverence with which they regarded it; and Hezekiah unhesitatingly swept it away from his path of national reformation, calling it *Nehush-tan*, a mere piece of old brass, with a contemptuous play upon the word *Nahash*, a serpent. And it is not difficult to understand why the good king should have acted in this manner. Had the nation never regarded the brazen serpent as an idol, or had they outgrown the superstitious veneration with which they had at one time worshipped it, then no moral danger would have arisen from the retention of it among the treasures of the nation as a most precious memorial of God's care of Israel in the olden time. It might have been innocently preserved like the pot of manna, or Aaron's rod, or the staves by which the vessels of the tabernacle were carried in the wilderness wanderings, as a most interesting and instructive relic of national history. But when it ceased to be looked upon as a mere symbol, and was worshipped for its own sake as an idol, and men expected the same supernatural power to be exerted by its own dead form as God had wrought through its instrumentality in the past, no veneration connected with it as

a memorial could be allowed to stand in the way of its destruction. It must be broken to pieces and swept out of the way, so that no man should ever be tempted to worship it again. We see the necessity of abolition from the tone of popular feeling which Hezekiah's work of reformation had excited. It caused a very violent shock to the religious prejudices of a large number of the people; and we read that Rabshakeh the Assyrian appealed to the discontented faction, and represented Hezekiah as a dangerous innovator who had provoked God's anger by his arbitrary impiety. It was the widespread existence of such a blind superstition as this which made such a complete extirpation of the idols on the part of Hezekiah necessary. He could not retain things which in other circumstances might have been preserved as interesting heirlooms or curiosities without running the serious risk of their being perverted into instruments of idolatry. And therefore he broke in pieces the brazen serpent, which had long ago been the medium of healing influence, just as he would have broken any ordinary piece of brass that had been moulded into an idol and set up yesterday for worship.

And just as Hezekiah acted, so must every reformer placed in similar circumstances act.

When idols are believed in they must be destroyed. When objects that once suggested high and holy feelings have become associated only with superstitious ideas, they must be broken in pieces. And this because of the moral danger connected with them. Nations and races newly-converted from idolatry, in the revulsion of feeling, act with violence towards the objects they formerly worshipped *because they have not emerged completely out of idolatry*. They have not emancipated themselves from their superstition. They fear its power on them because they still believe in it to some extent, just as a man suffers in a nightmare agonies and horrors while he believes them real. The temptation of idolatry is still very powerful and terrible to those who feel that they are under its influence. The deep pagan darkness has only given place as yet to the dim, confused, shadowy dawn, and therefore the terror has not wholly passed away "as a dream when one awaketh." Their idols are not to them simply pieces of wood or stone or metal, but have a real existence and a real power. And therefore they cannot afford to be tolerant. If they would free themselves entirely from the malignity of the idolatrous powers, they must destroy the idols. So was it with the

mediæval Christians who broke down images and persecuted idolators, just because their own Christianity was greatly adulterated by pagan ideas, and they believed that idolatry represented a real supernatural power. And therefore in order to get rid of the malevolent influence effectively they must destroy the idols. At the Reformation the ignorant crowd ruthlessly destroyed the beautiful abbeys and cathedrals of our country because they believed that the corruption of Roman Catholicism was in the buildings themselves as much as in those who used them as places of worship. There was a secret sympathy in their hearts with the sources of evil out of which the corruptions of the old religion had sprung, and they dreaded the effects of these over them unless the objects with which they had been associated were completely removed out of the way. The prehistoric altars of the early sun-worship of our country, the Druidic circles associated with the dark superstitions of our remote forefathers, were ordered to be cast down and broken up by the ministers of the Christian Church, just because of the old feelings of veneration that clung to them, and because they were supposed to possess some portion of the old mysterious power. The synods of the Presby-

terian Church ordered the crosses of Iona to be cast into the sea from a feeling that they were still dangerous to the reformed faith, and they fulminated the severest censures against the worship of wells and trees and stones, and other superstitious practices, and punished those who were guilty of them just because these things were not regarded as mere interesting archæological customs and survivals, handed down by tradition, but involved the acknowledgment of a supernatural power different from that of the Christian faith. And so it is with many converts still, who in their new-born zeal often rush to extremes, and destroy the things they formerly revered. They have not learned the great truth that the mischief is not in things but in souls; and so long as they believe that the evil is in things, so long will they wish to destroy them in order to deliver themselves from their spell. This is inevitable; and this feeling belongs to a rudimentary spiritual state, to the confused, shadowy dawn of the new life when it sees men as trees walking, and only half realises the freedom with which the truth as it is in Jesus has made us free. Iconoclasm and fanaticism belong essentially to a condition of the soul that is still too much akin to the old idolatry. Moreover, besides being

an elementary, this is an easy theory of life and of the world. It is far easier to destroy altogether outward objects that suggest or have been associated with temptation than to overcome the evil in the soul from which the temptation comes. It is only after much discipline and sore struggle that by the help of the Lord the spirit of evil within is cast out and things once blackened with evil begin for us a new ministry of truth and love. There are objects existing in the midst of us that were associated with superstitious belief. But we do not destroy them now, because these superstitious beliefs have been long exploded, and the objects themselves are to us now only interesting from an antiquarian point of view. How foolish we should deem the man who would go about now destroying the Druidical circles that loom through the mists of our moorlands like the bleached bones of a long extinct faith, and casting down the crosses that still stand in our old churchyards and market-places, as dangerous to the faith of the community. We have long outgrown the superstitions which these objects represented, and therefore we can tolerate their existence, nay, even treat them with some reverence, because they find nothing in us to appeal to, except the harmless love of antiquity. In

proportion as men free themselves from superstitious belief, and realise that an idol is "nothing in the world," as the Apostle Paul says, so fanatical cruelty and iconoclasm become as impossible to them as fanatical idolatry. They have the serene indifference which the apostle himself had. When they have to put away the images which they formerly worshipped, they do not either fiercely break them to pieces as if they had still power to injure or enslave us, or throw them out contemptuously with the common refuse or wreckage of the earth, as if human reverence and affection had never clung to them, and invested them with a kind of sanctity. With a feeling of pity for all the wealth of devotion wasted upon them, with a calmness and elevation of faith and spirituality of feeling, utterly different from superstitious fanaticism, they take the dumb, dead, discarded things and bury them in the earth as Jacob buried his household gods, as nature buries in the soil the scales that in spring have fallen from the unfolding buds, or the chaff that has fallen in autumn from the ripened seed. And so the great merciful Mother hides them from our eyes, as she hides away so gently and silently a thousand other signs of the weakness and immaturity of our hearts.

THE RIGHT TREATMENT OF IDOLS 49

And is not this treatment the best and wisest we could adopt? By the grace of God we as a people have been translated out of the darkness of heathenism into the glorious light of the Gospel. We have cast idols to the moles and bats, the creatures that dwell in the darkness; and we have cause to rejoice in our emancipation. But are we not too apt to despise the religion out of which we have risen, and to take up a hostile attitude towards anything in that religion that was different from our present faith? Are we not apt to think that it is an honouring of God to treat with contempt and abhorrence those idols by the help of which men in their ignorance, without a divine revelation, grope after Him? Alas! few are enlightened enough to know that idolatry, so far from being, as it has been misrepresented to be, a proof of man's wilful alienation from God, and a direct result of the desperate wickedness of his heart, is on the contrary a proof of man's yearning for God, without whom he cannot live, a witness to what is best and highest in humanity. To suppose that idolatries were invented for the express purpose of producing moral corruption and spiritual wickedness, is to misunderstand alike the testimony of Scripture and of human nature.

Whatever in later ages idolatries became, through association with foul acts of cruelty and sensuality, there can be no doubt that they had their origin in an effort to supply man's sense of weakness with the help which only a Power higher than humanity could give. It was because of the salt of heavenly truth in them, which preserved many things in them better than themselves, that they endured amid all the dreadful evils connected with them. And no one, who knows what profound views of the problems of human life and of the world must have been at work in the minds of those who first sowed the seeds of pagan idolatries, can regard with any other sentiment than profound pity the idol images of the heathen. We see in them the sad failures of human faith, the abortive attempts of men to climb the heavens and bring down God to the earth. And as such they deserve anything at our hands but contempt.

He who wept over the doomed Jerusalem must have had compassion upon those dark souls that were as sheep without a shepherd, blindly seeking in the worship of false gods what could be found only in Him who was preparing to reveal Himself unto them. He whose spirit was stirred within him when he saw the city of Athens wholly given up

to idolatry, instead of denouncing the idols of the people, adopted the wiser way of revealing to them the true God, of whom these idols testified dimly and mistakenly. Instead of laying the axe at the root of their whole system of religion as utterly false and unworthy of consideration, he showed them that there was a measure of truth in their religion, though obscured and distorted by much error—that they had some common ground with him, on which he could build for them the structure of true faith. He showed that their false gods demonstrated the existence of a spiritual world which is not a falsehood but an enduring reality. He revealed to them the substance of which the fantastic shapes of their mythology were the distorted reflection. Their “unknown God” he unveiled before them, “Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.” And the method of the apostle is that which every missionary should adopt in dealing with the idols of the heathen, interpreting to them the dark things of their religion in the light of Christianity, instead of denouncing them; constructing and not destroying. Great care should in every case be taken in separating the mind from its superstitions, that the process should be done reverently; for if

men are taught to despise their own past history, and to treat with contempt what they formerly worshipped, it is to be feared that the very soil in which true religion should grow will be removed from the heart, and only the hard, naked roots of utter unbelief be left behind. We must never forget that God is educating human beings through their very idolatries and errors. He is leading us by our delusions and superstitions to a clearer and fuller recognition of the truth; just as He led the wise men of the east, not through their accurate scientific, but through their false astrological knowledge of the stars, to the feet of Christ. They were wise through a faith that was beyond their knowledge, and so there is a star in all our superstitions and idolatries, which, if we have an honest and devout spirit, will guide us out through the darkness into the true light. And we shall bury the idols by which we have been trained, as things that helped us, but which we have now outgrown, with reverent pity, in the same state of faith and feeling in which Jacob buried the gods of his household. And we shall apply the principle of the text more widely still. The Talmud forbids a man to throw a stone into a well from which he has just drunk. He should

not despise or ill-use what has been so serviceable to him. And so we should not despise the things that we have outgrown, and without which our larger life would have been impossible. The loss of the emotions which they bred in us from childhood would be very inadequately repaid by a mere gain in scientific accuracy. They were closely connected with certain types of beauty, and their images did good service in raising our minds from the enforced contemplation of the sordid troubles of life. They have fed our imaginations and widened our horizons, and we are the better able to appreciate the solid facts of life because of this education. We should treat with reverence, therefore, the things we have surpassed—the ladder of our dead selves on which we have climbed to higher things—the chaff and the straw of immature truth by which the full corn in the ear has been grown, and the golden harvest of complete fulfilment has been attained—acknowledging their beauty and use with gratitude and reverence even when compelled to save ourselves from them and abandon them for ever.

JACOB AND THE THREE HEBREW
CONFESSORS

JACOB AND THE THREE HEBREW CONFESSORS

“And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God: and this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that Thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto Thee.”—GEN. xxviii. 20-22.

“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and He will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”—DAN. iii. 16-18.

I HAVE chosen these two remarkable passages as the subject of our meditations for the sake of the striking contrast which they present. In the one passage we have a bargain of faith made with God; in the other we have the disinterested confession

of men who wished to do what was right in God's eyes for its own sake. "If," says Jacob, "Thou wilt prosper me, I will serve Thee." "If not," says Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, "yet we will not disown Thee, nor give Thy glory to another." What a profound significance there is in the contrast between that "if" and that "if not"! What a difference, wide as the poles asunder, is there between the two states of mind which they indicate!

Let us look in the first place at the confession of faith of Jacob. There are unreasoning individuals who imagine that because Jacob was the father of the Israelites, and was brought into the closest covenant relation with God, he was therefore altogether and from the beginning an enlightened saint, a perfect character, and that he was at the commencement of his career as good a man as he was at the end. What meaning can the life of Jacob possibly have for such unthinking persons, to whom the characters of the Bible are like the toy soldiers which a child puts on their wooden frame and moves backwards and forwards, in single file, or in companies, according as he opens and shuts the frame mechanically. We must remember that Jacob was a human being, not merely a type or spiritual effigy.

The Bible tells us that he was a man that needed to be educated and lifted out of low conceptions of religion and out of very unworthy worldly practices. There were two sides to his nature. He had a greedy covetousness and a high spiritual ambition. He had a strong desire to obtain the good things of this world, and a keen faculty of faith which enabled him to set his affections on things unseen, and to postpone the fulfilment of his highest hopes to the distant future. Those two natures were ever asserting themselves and contending in him for the victory, and the struggle made his life a peculiarly chequered and sorrowful one. Jacob was indeed far from being an exemplary character. He had in no ordinary degree the follies, treacheries, and meannesses which often coexist with the noblest qualities in the same nature; but he had what men of splendid genius too often lack, the grace to repent of his moral failures and to lay hold of the strength of the angel that was redeeming him from all evil by the experience of these sore evils. Such a man had terrible lessons to learn in that discipline of life to which the Divine calling elected him.

When he is introduced to us at Bethel, it is the evils of his nature that come to the

surface, and not the virtues. He had been obliged to flee from his home, after having been guilty of an act of treachery not common even among those who make no profession of religion. He passed stage after stage through the mountainous wilderness of Judea, with his mind full of bitter thoughts and his heart heavy with the sullenness of sin. There is no compunction or remorse for his shameful deed in his breast. He broods over the hardships of his lot, and not over the cruel wrong he has done to his brother. He comes at last to a lonely sanctuary on the top of a hill near the Canaanite town of Luz. It is a place in which from time immemorial the heathen inhabitants have worshipped the powers of nature, the only god they knew. He lies down in the centre of the standing stones, overcome with fatigue and misery. And yet while taking advantage in his necessity of the shelter and safety which the shrine affords him, he has no feeling of reverence for it. He regards the spot which to so many of his fellow-creatures is a holy place, allied with the highest and purest conceptions which they could form of God, with indifference if not contempt. He feels as Abraham felt when he was in Abimelech's country, "Surely the fear of the Lord is not

in this place ;” and he cared as little for his own religion as he cared for the religion of the heathen around. He was absorbed in self-pity. He lay down to sleep with no thought of the God of his fathers, without a single prayer for forgiveness or help.

It was in that hour, when he was least worthy of the consideration of heaven, that the heavenly vision appeared to him, and confirmed to him in that heathen sanctuary the covenant promise. But though the thought of God was thus forcibly revealed to him, and he felt that the place on which he lay was holy ground, he was not by any means purified from his selfishness or his low carnal conceptions of religion. There was no true repentance or contrition in his soul. His faith was mingled with superstition. He conformed to the practice of the heathen ; and like the heathen he made a bargain with God, that if He would provide for his temporal wants he would love and serve Him. All this shows us what crude and unworthy ideas of God Jacob up to this point entertained, how his view of the covenant hopes and privileges partook largely of the worldliness of his own nature. It was the temporal gains and advantages that the covenant offered, more than its spiritual blessings, which com-

mended it to Jacob, and made him adopt such questionable means of securing what he longed for. And there can be little doubt that if his biography had ended at this point, we should be constrained to be sceptical regarding the development of the germ of early piety in his soul; and to believe that it had been overlaid and choked by an after-growth of unchecked worldliness.

Jacob is the typical Jew; and what we see in him we see in the children of Israel of whom he was the true father. The same bargain of faith which he made with God in Bethel his descendants often made with God in the wilderness and in the land of Canaan. The blessings promised to them for obedience to the law were temporal blessings. They were told to do good, and that it would be well with them as regards the things of this world. They believed with the friends of Job that worldly prosperity was the infallible proof of God's approbation; and they expected this kind of success to follow upon all their efforts to do good; and when they did not obtain outward success, they believed that the secret of their disappointment lay in their spiritual insufficiency. They were constantly covenanting with God, that if He would bestow upon them some special temporal blessing which they coveted, they would devote

themselves more entirely to His service. "Doth Job fear God for naught?" was Satan's insinuation; and in the case of the Israelites there was too much to justify it. Only in a few exceptional cases did they show in their religious services that they were actuated by pure disinterested love for God. They were mostly religious because God prospered them; because they found it to answer their purpose. How often did the Jews of our Saviour's time wish to make bargains of faith with Him? If He worked a special miracle, appealing in a particular way to their senses, they would believe. Jesus always shrank from a faith which rested upon miracles, and refused to work miracles on demand because of the real scepticism upon which their idea of such miracles was based. He had to complain that the multitude sought Him for the sake of the loaves and fishes, and not for the sake of His spiritual teaching, and appreciated only what supplied their temporal wants in the wonder, while their eyes were sealed and their hearts hardened against all that was significant in it of heavenly things.

The kind of religion which Jacob manifested at Bethel is the lowest form of religion. It is founded upon the idea that God is like ourselves; that He is influenced by selfish, interested motives, and that He can be made

to comply with human wishes, whether they be right or wrong; that He is not unchangeable, inflexibly good and righteous, but sways to this side or that according as pressure is brought to bear upon Him, or a sufficiently large bribe offered to Him. While the most degrading and repulsive form of this fetishism is seen among savages, the principles upon which it is based is not confined to them. We have numerous illustrations of it in very unexpected quarters. It intrudes itself into Christianity. The impious system of Indulgences in the Roman Catholic Church is founded upon it—the belief that the favour of a particular saint can be bought; that the pardon of sin can be procured by certain services at certain shrines. If Roman Catholics know of any saint more powerful than another, they transfer their fealty to him; and they show their resentment when he does not grant them the favours they ask, by relegating him to oblivion, much in the same way as the pagans of old exclaimed against their gods as treacherous when they denied them any boon for which they craved. How many of the prayers which Protestants offer up, how many of the vows and good resolutions of church-going people, are dictated by interested motives? How many are religious solely on account of the respectability connected with

it, solely on account of the consideration which it gives them in society or in the market-place? They find that it pays them to have a good reputation in the Church, and they trade upon their good name. They care not for the spiritual benefits, but only for the material advantages that are to be got from their Church connection. The poor persons who connect themselves with a prosperous congregation in order to participate in its charitable doles, or who welcome the visit of Bible-woman, elder, or minister for the sake of the gifts they impart; the rich persons who join a fashionable Church to raise themselves in the social scale; the intellectual persons who wait upon an intellectual ministry in order to acquire the reputation of being among the élite of the wise and learned; all these are making bargains of faith with God, serving Him not because they find in His worship that which satisfies the deepest wants of their souls, and appeals to their higher nature made for immortality, but in order that God may prosper them, and give them the worldly success upon which their hearts are set.

I am afraid that were many of us to analyse the motives which constrain us to serve God, we should find them to partake largely of this unworthy nature. We should find mingling

with our holiest services much of this leaven of worldliness and covetousness which we condemn in Jacob and in the ancient Jews. The very notion of salvation which is largely prevalent among us is of this character. It is as a salvation from wrath, and not as a salvation from sin, that it is most valued; we are to cultivate it as a salvation to an external heaven of delights and freedom from sorrow, and not as a salvation to holiness and true goodness. It is sad to think of the way in which some Christians speak of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as if its design was meant, not to enable men to live holy lives on earth, but to insure them against the chances of the life to come. Instead of destroying selfishness, the religion of such persons is based upon selfishness, and begets the deepest of all selfishness. No wonder that sceptics and secularists should characterise this other-worldliness as radically irreligious, and as the source of low and inhuman views of life; and should extol their own system of unbelief as holding forth a higher ideal than the Christian morality, inasmuch as they exhort men to labour for the welfare of their fellow-creatures and the good of the world, irrespective of all future consequences. The old accusation against Job may be brought against our modern Churches with their selfish doctrines

and their selfish motives, having respect to worldly things more than to heavenly things ; and we may ask with a feeling of pain and shame, "Do Christians fear God for naught ?" If God will be with us, and will keep us in this way that we go, and will give us bread to eat and raiment to put on, so that we come again to our father's house in peace ; then the Lord shall be our God, and this stone which we have set up for a pillar shall be God's house.

How little Jacob's resolution partook of the nature of true religion, how little there was in it of the true knowledge of God, of faith in Him, and love to Him, how little it displayed of change of heart and life, is made clearly manifest by the fact that as soon as the pillar was set up and the vow recorded, Jacob forgot the whole circumstance, and though every petition was granted, and all he asked he obtained—he got bread to eat and raiment to put on ; he was delivered from the vengeance of Esau his brother ; he came back to his father's house in peace, and in unimagined prosperity—it never occurred to him that all this was the answer to his prayer, till long afterwards the Lord Himself reminded him. And had it not been for this striking reminder, Bethel and its pillar would have faded for ever from his memory. All

this shows how slight was the impression made upon him by his vow, how little it had to do with the real state of his heart. And so it is with all religion that is based upon a similar bargain with God. If we serve Him only in consideration of His prospering us, then when the prosperity comes, we shall not consider it an answer to our prayer; we shall not associate it with our religion at all; and by our very forgetfulness we shall prove that our vow had not touched our true nature.

But I now pass on to consider the confession of faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. How nobly does it stand out from the dark background of Jacob's religion. "If God will prosper me I will serve Him." "If God does not prosper us," said the Hebrew confessors, "we will serve Him. We cannot but serve Him." Jacob identified religion with outward circumstances; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shifted the question of man's well-being "from the circumference to the centre," from the circumstances to the soul. It is not a question of outward well-being at all; it is a vital question of inward spiritual well-being. Whatever may happen to us, whether we suffer or succeed, whether we die or live, in all circumstances we shall worship the God of our fathers, and we will not serve the idols of the world. How much more trying was

the position of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego than that of the Hebrew patriarch. Jacob had only to face poverty, hardship, and privation, the evils brought upon him by his own sin. The three Hebrew confessors had to face death in its most appalling form. Jacob had only to resist his own rebellious will; the Babylonian martyrs had to resist the will of the mightiest potentate on earth, whose will was like the law of gravitation manifested in the falling upon them of a mountain crushing them to atoms. Had Jacob in the state of mind in which he was when he made his bargain of faith with God been placed in the position of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who can doubt that he would inevitably have succumbed? With the moral infirmities of his nature, and his disposition at this stage of his history to walk by sight and not by faith, he would have followed the example of the people of Babylon. The power of the awful monarch would have overwhelmed him, every good resolution he had formed would have fallen away from him, and he would have abandoned without scruple the profession of a religion whose power he had only imperfectly realised. At the proclamation of the herald, and at the sound of the musical instruments, he would have fallen down and worshipped the golden image, and allied him-

self with the great and high of the world. But it was not so with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were able to withstand the rage and fury of the Assyrian potentate, and all the pride and power of Babylon, because they had a law in their own hearts higher than the law of Nebuchadnezzar, and knew that they had a great inalienable possession in the spiritual experience for which they contended, and which made life a nobler thing to them. They had a core of inexhaustible strength within themselves in the realisation of the infinite preciousness of Divine truth. They felt that they had a special mission to proclaim the unity and spiritual nature of God amid a corrupt and idolatrous world, and they dare not be disobedient to the heavenly mission; there was a necessity in this respect laid upon them, and woe to them if they did not uphold it. By the loftiness of their convictions, they were raised to a kindred loftiness above the interested motives that usually sway men. "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us." He holds the stars in His right hand, and He can sweep kings, even the mightiest, from the path of His purposes, as a breeze sweeps the autumn leaves away. It may be in His gracious design to interpose for our deliverance out of thy hands, but if not, He

is our God all the same. For wise and gracious reasons of His own He may leave us to face the full force of thy vengeance, but nothing can shake our belief in Him. For our faith does not depend upon miracles, or signal providences, or temporal blessings, it depends upon our own personal experience of His goodness and the essential blessedness of serving Him. "Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy god, nor worship the golden image thou hast set up." Sublime words indeed, calm and dignified and self-respectful, but full of the heroism of faith, indicating the immense contrast between mere human greatness and the spiritual greatness that defies all the power of man and would not be conquered by the whole world.

This is true religion—true faith. It does not depend upon outward things; it is independent of circumstances. It is a deep-felt experience in the soul. It is such a realisation of God as our own God and of Christ as our Saviour as will satisfy all the wants and longings of our souls. It is such an absolute trust in Him as in the midst of the greatest human trials will compel us to say, "Good is the will of the Lord." How different this experience of the grace of God from a religion which men assume merely to escape from hell or go

to heaven; a religion which they conventionally profess to gain the goodwill of their fellow-men, and to get the good things of this world. It was this excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus that made Paul count all things but loss for the sake of it. It was this faith that made the early Christian martyrs go joyfully to the scaffold and the stake. And though in these days of universal toleration it is not necessary that we should witness to our faith by enduring persecutions and martyrdoms, we are required still to cherish a faith that would not flinch if so tested—a faith which can overcome the minor martyrdoms and trials of our daily life. The world is full of golden images to which thousands bow down their knees. We are tempted continually to follow the multitude to do evil, to do as others do, to make friends with the world and so get on in the world. But as professing Christians, we should be able from our own deep, heartfelt experience of the sufficiency of divine grace to say, "If God should prosper us in the path of righteousness which our religion commands us to follow, good and well; but if not, then we must do what is right and lead godly lives at all hazards."

I have said that the resolution of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stands grandly out

in contrast to the vow of the patriarch at Bethel. And yet God had regard to the feeble, cloudy faith of Jacob, and made it the starting-point of a noble life. We see how greatly he profited by the stern discipline of life; how the sorrows that came to him as the fruits and the punishments of his greed and selfishness were made the means of his deliverance from these vices; how he was enabled to rise high above the spirit of unscrupulous covetousness which made him grovel in the dust in his earlier years, into a wider and purer atmosphere. Looking back at the Court of Pharaoh, over his long and chequered life, he realised that it was only a weary pilgrimage, in which by passing quickly through the varied scenes and experiences of earth, he might acquire the heart of a stranger towards all its possessions, and be trained to lay up treasure with God in heaven. The angel did indeed, through sharp pain and long patience and stern discipline, redeem him from all evil, the deeper evil of his nature as well as the outward evil of his lot. He who made a bargain with God at Bethel, could, as life neared its close, feel that in his extremity he had an arm of everlasting strength, and a bosom of infinite love to rest upon, and could say exultingly, "I have waited for Thy salvation, O God!"

The same angel can redeem us too as it redeemed Jacob, and by similar means, from our low, selfish, worldly conceptions of religion. Beginning the religious life like the Philippian jailor, with the desire after mere material safety, we may go on to long after spiritual blessedness. Entering upon the pilgrim's path in the expectation that we shall find it easy and prosperous, we may, as we exercise ourselves unto godliness, so learn to love the beauty of holiness that for its sake we may be ready to make any sacrifice of worldly gain. Temporal prosperity, we are told, was the blessing of the Old Testament, and the Cross of the New. But alike under the old and new dispensations the path of righteousness has ever been beset with pains and losses and sacrifices. Nevertheless, the man who dares to live fearlessly under the Divine rule finds in the long run, notwithstanding the confused issues of a sin-stricken world, that his life has been nobler and truly happier than if he had lived entirely for himself. An assurance like this wrought into the inmost texture of a man's mind can make a hero, and if need be a martyr, of him; and he will be prepared to follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth, through good report and through bad report, through the furnace itself, heated sevenfold,

without hesitation, saying, to any temptation that would seek to seduce him from duty, with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, "Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

"Faith hath its visions, pure and high,
Of mystic succour surely nigh,
And land that knows no tear or sigh.

But if no angel wing should gleam,
Nor crystal fountain healing stream,
If earth be all, and heaven a dream?

Thy God delivers from the flame!
But 'if not,' were it still the same?
What saith the cross of death and shame?

'Yea, though He slay me I will trust';
Soul! this is life, and God is just;
On all the rest is dust to dust!"

BOCHIM

BOCHIM

“The people lifted up their voice, and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim.”—JUDGES ii. 4, 5.

THESE words fills us with surprise. A whole nation in mourning must have been a most remarkable sight. A spectator ignorant of the history of the Israelites would have imagined from the universal tokens of grief which he saw around him, that they were weeping on account of some cruel reverse of fortune, some terrible defeat at the hands of their enemies, or the loss of some great leader on whom their affections and hopes were centred. But great would be his astonishment to be told that never in all their history had their circumstances been more favourable than they were at that moment. They had conquered all their enemies; they had realised all their hopes. Joshua their leader had indeed fallen, but he had accomplished the great mission of

his life. Why, then, when there was no ostensible cause, should they weep? We read that the people mourned greatly at Kadesh, on the borders of the Land of Promise, when the spies came back and brought a most discouraging account of the difficulties that lay in the way of conquering the country; and in consequence of their rebellious lamentations and cowardly distrust of God's help in the enterprise, they had to go back into the wilderness anew and there lead a wandering life, until every grown-up man and woman of them should have perished there. But now they had crossed the Jordan, entered the Holy Land, and in a series of brilliant victories they had overthrown the cities and cast out the inhabitants. The whole country was theirs from Dan to Beersheba. They had parcelled out its territories among their tribes and families. From a race of slaves ground down by oppression in Egypt they had become a community of freedmen, educated by God's training and discipline to be the guardians of the liberty and religion of mankind. But now that all their aspirations are crowned with success, we read that instead of experiencing a feeling of repose and thankfulness as we should have expected, they lifted up their voice and wept; and the place where this great national grief was

manifested, a region immediately to the north of Gilgal, which was itself on the south-eastern frontier of Palestine, received from the circumstance the significant name of Bochim—or the Weepers.

The context explains to us what would otherwise have been most mysterious, the reason of this national lamentation at Bochim. An angel of the Lord appeared there to the Israelites, and administered to them a severe rebuke on account of their disobedience to the Divine commands. They had not fulfilled the conditions upon which Canaan was to be given to them. They had not extirpated the primitive inhabitants who had polluted the land by their frightful idolatries and wickednesses; and so it could not become to them the pure, peaceful home which God had meant it to be. They had consulted their own ease and love of indulgence, and they were satisfied with the mere possession of the land, regardless altogether of the moral conditions on which they held its tenure. Its plenty was more to them than its purity; and its promise of wealth and leisure shut out all other considerations from their view. But the angel of the Lord showed to them the fatal mistake which they had made. He discovered to them, as with a lightning flash, the moral purpose for which as a peculiar

people zealous of good works He had given to them the land, and how grievously they had fallen short of His intentions regarding them, and frustrated His design. It was an hour of self-revelation. Conscience asserted its claims above the flatteries of material success. They were pricked to the heart, and burst out into a simultaneous and universal grief, the sound of which has echoed through all the ages to the present time.

The possession of Canaan was the great national hope of the Israelites to which they looked forward as the end of all their trials. In the wilderness when enduring the hardships and privations of their unsettled life, they had doubtless often comforted themselves with the thought of the rest and fruition that should be theirs when once they entered the beautiful land whither they were bound. In their dreams its cultivated fields stretched out in all their green beauty, contrasting strikingly with the arid wastes they were painfully traversing; visions of cool, cloudy skies that distilled the dew and the gentle rain on leafy trees and brilliant flowers, rose up before their imaginations when the sun of the desert poured down its scorching rays on the burning sands, and there was no shadow from the oppressive

glare. In the parched silence of the wilderness the streams of the far off country of their hopes would murmur with a refreshing sound to their inner ear; and when the manna lay white like hoar-frost on the tawny ground around their tents in the mornings, until they loathed the insipid food, they pictured to themselves the yellow cornfields and the purple vineyards which were fairer and richer than those which their fathers had seen on the banks of the Nile. The land flowing with milk and honey was to them all that Eden was to our first parents. There they should rest under their own vine and fig-tree with none to make them afraid. There all their privations would be compensated with abundance; all their hardships and trials would be forgotten in a blissful sense of repose; and permanent undisturbed possession of all the material resources of the land would leave not a care to disturb their ease, nor a want unsatisfied.

So they dreamed; but widely different did they find the reality. When they first came in sight of the Holy Land, when they stood on its border and looked across on its rich and varied scenery rising up into lofty hills and descending into fertile valleys, and the spies brought back the most glowing account of the beauty and richness of the country, and

showed them the most wonderful specimens of its fruits in the grapes of Eshcol, they found to their dismay that they were not to get quiet and immediate possession of it as they had hoped. They fancied that all they had to do was merely to go in, and the way would be opened up before them as they advanced without let or hindrance. Great, therefore, was their disappointment and their terror when they were told that the land was occupied by fierce and warlike races, its fields cultivated by a people further advanced in the arts of life than they were ; and its commanding heights studded with towns and villages great and walled up to heaven. The Canaanites were prepared to fight for their fields and hearths to the uttermost, and to dispute with the utmost vigour every inch of the ground. Only by the force of arms, only by superior skill and bravery could they wrest their possessions from the aborigines and supplant them in the land. Their history for many years would run on in blood. It would be long ere the dread vintage of war should give place to the peaceful vintage of the grape. The siege of Jericho, the defeat at Ai, the battle of Bethhoron, many an awful fight would be fought, and many a fearful massacre passed through, and many a weary

toil and trial endured ere they should obtain full possession of the Holy Land. No wonder that such a rude shock to their dreams of ease and pleasure should have stricken them to the very heart, and caused this great national mourning which has immortalised the memory of Bochim.

~~Such grief, however, is salutary.~~ The Israelites needed to be taught the great lesson that every advantage instead of being an end whereon to rest, ought to be a stimulus to renewed effort, a higher vantage-ground for enlarged acquisition. Canaan was merely an episode in their wandering life as a nation. It was to do for them in a nobler form what the wilderness life had done for them in a lower form. They were to be trained by the more settled conditions of their cultivated fields and walled cities for the purposes of God, as they had been trained by the unsettled camp life of the desert. As they had gone into the Holy Land a wiser and nobler race than when they left Egypt, so they should go out of the Holy Land a still more educated and disciplined nation to benefit mankind by the results of their discipline. Like Abraham their father and founder, whose life was one long pilgrimage, so should they be a nation of pilgrims, having nowhere a continuing city, halting awhile in Canaan as they had

halted awhile in each of the stations of the desert, and seeking through it all the city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. And though the learning of that lesson eclipsed many bright earthly hopes, and brought with it many bitter tears, it was worth while to have learnt it. Their tears washed their eyes clearer and their hearts purer. They saw deeper into the teachings of Providence, and farther into the experiences and destinies of life. They knew as they had never known before that Joshua had not given them rest when he had given them the possession of Canaan, that there still remained a rest for the people of God—a rest that, like the horizon, receded the nearer they got to it—a rest that was only to be obtained by resolute struggle and noble endurance, and faithful perseverance unto the end.

We are taught in the teaching of the Israelites. Their wanderings in the wilderness and their conquest of Canaan are an acted parable in which we see our own experiences faithfully pictured. And just as ┌ Bochim was one of the necessary incidents in the history of the Israelites, so is it a necessary incident in the life of every individual. Every one knows something of the feeling that made the Israelites weep at that place

and can sympathise with the cause. Sometime or other there comes to each of us a revelation such as the Israelites had and a revulsion of feeling such as they suffered from. There is no life that has not its illusions and disenchantments, its stern awakenings and its bitter lessons. Every young person looks forward to the future as the Israelites looked forward to Canaan. They surround the period of maturity—when they shall be grown-up men and women—with a halo of joy. At present they are under constraint and discipline. They are at school, learning tasks which are not joyous but grievous. They think more of the restraints and privations of their education than of its advantages. Life is narrowed all round by fences; and they can only get glimpses through the bars of a fulness of enjoyment for which they crave. In these circumstances they long for a larger life. They think that when they are done with school and cross the threshold of the grander world to which school-life leads that they will have a good time, that life will be to them one long holiday. But when at length they grow up and enter upon the active pursuits of life, they find to their sore disappointment that their dreams have been illusions. Instead of ease and enjoyment they have anxiety and

trouble. They find that existence is a struggle with difficulties, that each day brings new trials and new cares, that their powers must be ever braced up for active work and patient endurance. This discovery is a *Bochim*; and the young, inexperienced heart in this its first contact with the hard facts and circumstances of life, receives a shock from which it takes long to recover. In the deep sadness that comes over the spirit, the days of youth that seemed so tiresome and confined when they were lived through glow with a radiance and a freedom that contrast strikingly with the dulness and bondage of the present. And he who was so impatient to be delivered from the restraints of school would now willingly go back to them.

Every one sets an ideal before him, the realisation of which is to constitute the supreme blessedness of life. Who does not dream of a time when he shall have earned the right to retire from active work, having obtained a competency or a fortune by his talents and industry? And who does not believe that when that time has come for him, he will find life far happier than it is now, with greater leisure and opportunities of self-culture and doing good to others? Things that he is now compelled to forgo or to sacrifice on account of the devotion and concentration of purpose

which his business or profession requires of him, he will then be in a position to enjoy fully. Nature, of which he has now only time to get a few hasty, tantalising glimpses, will then yield its harvest of varied charms freely to his quiet eye; art, whose treasures he has not sufficient disengagement of mind now to appreciate, will then be an engrossing and satisfying pursuit; and literature will be a constant stimulus and solace. All that life holds before him in promise he expects then to make his own; all the good which can spring from the full unfolding and activity of all his faculties, and the enjoyment of the harmony which God has established between him and all the beautiful and enjoyable things of the world, he hopes to experience. And so he paints the bright dream of the future; and so he works hard to realise it. By and by he has earned the coveted wealth; the elegant leisure, the freedom from sordid cares which it secures, the varied resources of happiness which it places at his disposal, are his. But does he find the blessedness which he had so often pictured to himself as belonging specially to this period? Does he not instead find a Bochim at the threshold of his possession, and does he not lift up his voice and weep? Is this what he spent toilsome days of self-denial and sleepless nights of

anxiety to secure? It is not a life of enjoyment and fruition that he has entered upon, but a harder life than he knew before. He finds that the reward of successful work is only getting more and harder work to do, that he has to pay for his eminence above his fellows by having greater responsibilities laid upon him. The care and investment of wealth have more troubles connected with them than the acquisition of wealth. A day of leisure is more difficult to get through than a day of toil. Desire grows with increased possession, and unsatisfied desire is unhappy anywhere. There is need of strong excitement now to kindle the sensation of pleasure which once the simplest thing could yield. The successful man indeed finds that his difficulties and trials fairly begin when he has achieved success. The years of the struggle were truly the best and happiest years of his life. The pursuit was more delightful than the end. He may have had a hard and trying fight for it; and fears of failure were ever before him. These were substantial and formidable trials. But they kept him humble, patient, and diligent; they braced up his powers of body and mind; they taught him reliance upon the providence of God. But all that is now ended; and he weeps in soul when he feels how different is the

inheritance of his later and most successful years from the dreams of his early and struggling ones. He would give all his wealth and success if he might get his young, fresh nature back again.

Life is full of Bochims. The stars that gleam so brightly in the firmament of our hopes, when we reach them turn out to be common earth like that upon which we tread. 'Tis distance only that makes them stars. The mountain heights that lie along the horizon of the future in their own calm, transparent, purple beauty, looking like the shores of some heavenly land, when we attain to them change into ordinary rock and soil and wood, even more rugged and barren than the intervening region we had been traversing. We follow the rainbow of hope, and expect to find a treasure of blessing beneath the golden gleam that gilds the spot on which it rests, but the glow vanishes when we come up to it, and the spot seems all the colder and drearier because of the magic light that for awhile played on it. We see the skyline of achievement above us, clear-cut and well defined against the celestial blue, where ambition will be satisfied and life reach its climax, and there will be nothing more to hope or work for. But when with panting breath and beating heart we have

gained the elevated position, we find that the skyline of our hope blends with the common moor, and life there is as dull and prosaic as it was down in the valley, and other and grander heights tower high above us, and on their furthest summit recedes the skyline of a new hope. All such disenchantments and disillusionings are Bochims—times of sore depression and sorrow, when we are almost inclined to give up the struggle in despair.

But the saddest Bochim of all is that which comes to the young convert of religion. Life at the time of conversion is a peculiarly beautiful and happy thing. It is sanctified by the blessing of the Lord and sweetened by the Divine love that fills the heart. The heavenly enchanter's touch has turned everything to gold; the newly acquired joy of the Lord has by its magic influence made all feelings and possessions new, and transfigured the most familiar scenes and the most commonplace incidents and occupations by the light that never was on land or sea. But soon comes the inevitable reaction, the fading of the magic rose-hues into the common light of day, the return to ordinary ways and habits. The young convert expects the Christian life to be an heroic thing, living on the heights of spirituality, breathing a keener air, removed

above the evils of the lower world, transfigured by the Divine light, and ready to be translated into the Divine glory. And he finds it instead to be only the ordinary human life, lived out on low levels, and amid all the commonplace relations and circumstances of dull, prosaic society. He finds it made up of petty trials and duties, and small experiences, with nothing extraordinary calling for high impulses or glowing enthusiasms or wonderful sacrifices. He realises to his dismay that the religion of the Cross is a religion of hardship and difficulties, of trial and sorrow. Christianity is not an easy thing when it is something more than a profession, something higher than a name, something truer than a creed. When it becomes a life and a power it is from that moment a fight, a struggle, a discipline. There is a great company leagued against him, spiritualities of wickedness lurking about his path, ambushed in his very thoughts. There are evil principles within himself, the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, the pride of life, which he must oppose. There are evil principles at work in the world against which he must contend. There are fightings innumerable without, and fears unceasing within. And finding thus the elements of his training as stern and hard as ever, nay, more so, because he is now con-

tending against the stream instead of idly sailing with it, no wonder that he should lift up his voice and weep.

Now what is the design of this peculiar sorrow that comes upon us at every stage in life, when we find that the goal of our hope is not the goal of rest or of full satisfaction? Why is Bochim placed at the threshold of every new and larger experience of life? Why is it associated with fulfilled desire and assured possession, with great increase of knowledge, with a deeper comprehension of the mysteries of nature and of life? Some say that we have this sadness because life is all a failure. We were deluded before and we were happy; our eyes are now open and we see things as they truly are, and therefore this deep depression and gloom have come over us. Life can never be the same to us again, because the mask has fallen off it, and we know it for what it is—vanity and vexation of spirit. But can we believe for a moment that a wise and loving God, who has done all things well for His creatures, and has given to them His own Son to share and redeem their lot, meant that this blighting pessimism should be the meaning and purpose of the sadness of Bochim? Has He not assured us over and over again in His Word and convinced us by His providential dealings

that the design of sorrow is not to sicken us of life, but to make life a more valuable possession; that every disappointment and failure are not intended to make life poorer and meaner, but larger and richer, to deepen and widen the cup of our capacity that it may contain more. It is not meant that we should be idle and passive and helpless under it, but that we should be spurred by its sting to fresh exertion, under the stimulus of which it may pass away. The straits of our being lead to larger horizons, and the dark valleys of our sorrows to greener pastures and stiller waters. We are allured onward and upward by the illusions of our life, whose discovery is not joyous but grievous at the time. The hard, bare, mountain rock is clothed with the softness and beauty of the purple cloud that rests upon it by the distant enchantment, that our steps may be quickened over the dangerous plain. The mirage gleams for us in the far off sunlight on the barren sand, that going after it we may hasten out of the desert where it is death to linger. The marsh assumes the appearance of a well of sweet, refreshing water that we may not tarry by its side satisfied with what we have done, but pass on to the palm-trees and wells of a nobler Elim. The way to the Christian ideal is through a number of promised lands, each of

which in turn proves to be no real promised land at all, until at last by these grievous but gracious migrations, we reach that happy end of all our hopes and aspirations—the true and final Canaan above—when the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall lead us to fountains of living waters, and God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes.

THE FEAR OF EVIL

THE FEAR OF EVIL

“Whoso hearkeneth unto Me . . . shall be quiet from fear of evil.”—PROV. i. 33.

WERE you asked What is the greatest evil of life? you would, I am sure, at once unhesitatingly reply, The fear of evil. This is essentially a human experience. It is the special peculiarity of man. The lower animals are altogether free from it. They live only in and for the present. They have no fear of calamity or death. Coming events do not cast their shadows before for them. Like the sea-anemone in its rift in the rock, the tide of fortune flows and covers them and ebbs and leaves them dry, and they are conscious only of the feeling of the moment. They have no apprehension of the future and no memory of the past, and therefore the evil when it comes is robbed of more than half its sting. If we analyse pain or suffering, we find that when we have taken away the anticipation and the

recollection from it, there remains behind but a mere physical sensation which can be easily endured. More than three-fourths of the bitterness of every trial is caused by the mind dwelling upon it, "looking before and after." Man is so constituted that he cannot confine his experiences to the present moment. He cannot be a mere animal, realising only the sensation of the time. He must compare and contrast, remember and forecast; and all these elements of retrospection and vaticination swell the current of the suffering and increase its force.

In every evil, fear, or fearful anticipation, constitutes by far the worst part of it. However severe a trial may be, it is never so severe in the endurance as it threatened to be in the foreboding of it. We are surprised often at the groundlessness of our apprehension. The terrible monster that we saw in the distance magnified through the mist turns out to be a harmless roadside bush as we come up to it. We look forward to some threatening danger or trouble as a man looks up at a lofty waterfall. The stream on the skyline appears with such a force and volume that even the solid rock might seem to give way before it. But as it descends it melts into lace-like wreaths of vapour, which the wind sways hither and thither; and when at

last it reaches the dimpled pool far below, its spray falls softly as a summer shower, and the aspen leaf scarce quivers to its sound, and all the forest around assumes a greener verdure from its baptism. So we look forward with fear and dread to some evil which threatens to carry us away with an overflowing flood, but when it comes we find that our fears have been exaggerated, and the dark cloud has burst in blessings on our head. Many a man looks forward to the loss of his fortune with fear; the apprehension poisons all his springs of joy; but when it comes he finds how little his true happiness has been affected. He feels more contented in his lowlier lot, and healthier in his simpler and more natural circumstances than ever he did amid all his splendours and luxuries. A man sitting in a comfortable easy chair, beside a glowing fire, in a luxuriously furnished room, looking out upon another man in the street exposed to a violent storm of wind and rain, imagines that he cannot be anything else but miserable. He contrasts his own warmth and comfort with the wet, cold, draggled appearance of the wayfarer, and feels that he should be wretched in such circumstances. But the storm-tossed wayfarer does not feel like the comfortably situated man in the room. He is battling with the elements, and that gives

him a consciousness of his own powers, stirs up an energy and strength of resolution within him which makes him forget the disagreeableness of the situation, so that in reality he is happier fighting against his troubles than the lazy man in the midst of his comforts. And so there is a bracing influence in calamity which sends a glow of health tingling through the veins, and thus what seems a pitiful condition when we look at it from a guarded and comfortable situation, is in reality an enviable condition. When we are once plunged into the midst of the trouble, and all our energies are called into lively exercise, it is marvellous what strength comes to us to endure, and even to derive from the struggle a secret satisfaction. It is the long look-out beforehand, the standing shivering on the brink, trying to imagine what the actual plunge would be, and exaggerating its terrors—it is this that wastes the spirit and poisons the whole fountain of life.

And yet no experience of the futility of our fears, no philosophising upon the groundlessness of them, will ever cure us of our fearfulness. We anticipate the evil day still, and have weary days of care and sleepless nights of anxiety in regard to what we think is coming upon us. It is the birthright of our race; it is the drawback that is connected

with the great distinguishing gift of reason. It is part of our spiritual endowment, and marks us out above all other creatures by our superior power of suffering. Look around you, and you will understand how very much of the grievousness of life arises from this source, how many are the slaves of the fear of evil. Anxiety in some form or other besets the position of every one, and robs every household of its peace. Take the lowest ground of apprehension, viz., that regarding our circumstances in life, and you will see how that element alone furnishes most of the bitter experience in lives of thousands. We are constantly harping about the privations of the poor, but they are mercifully saved from much of that fear of evil which haunts the better classes. The sufferings of the apparently well-to-do are in reality greater, and affect the imagination far more when we become cognisant of them. The precarious modes of industry which many are compelled to adopt constantly endanger their foothold on the social ladder, and expose them to risks which threaten to ruin all their hopes. Whatever pleasures they may be able to snatch on the brink of such danger are embittered by the gloomy foreboding which preys in secret upon multitudes who seem prosperous and wear smiling faces in society. To every

church how many persons come Sabbath after Sabbath not so much to worship God as to get a little distraction from a weight of anxiety about their business affairs which well-nigh overpowers them? They cannot join in the songs of praise, for their sense of impending evil hides from their view the mercies they have to be thankful for; and they cannot profit by the services of the sanctuary, for their hearts are divided, and the cares of the world choke the seed of the Word and make it unfruitful.

But it is not in regard to our circumstances only—to our worldly substance—that we have the fear of evil. Even when that fear is removed, and we are placed beyond the reach of care and anxiety, and our circumstances are as assured to us as any in this world can be, another class of fear comes in to disturb our peace. We have fears regarding those dear to us, fear of illness or death happening to them, fear of friendship proving faithless, of love growing cold, fear of our plans failing, fear of our health giving way, of society ceasing to care for us. These and a thousand other fears of a similar kind cast their shadows before them and darken our path of life.

The great question, then, with every human being is, How are these fears to be got rid of?

How is the longing for assured tranquillity which every one has to be realised? Is there no way possible of combining activity and peace, of bringing some portion of contentment into our daily lives? There might, indeed, be some hope of this if each human being stood alone and held his fate in his own hand. But it is not so. Our lot is so much mixed up with that of others that we are continually at their mercy. We may make the most prudent arrangements for ourselves, but the faithlessness or foolishness or carelessness of others may make these precautions utterly vain. And then in regard to higher things, who shall secure us or those dearer than ourselves from the thousand ills to which they and we are exposed every moment of our lives? What shall guard us from the accidents of ill-fortune that may at any time blight our lot? And in matters that affect the soul there is our own heart condemning us, the Mordecai in the gate that turns all our sweetness into gall and wormwood—a fear of what the future has in store for those who are conscious of much evil done and much good left undone, of many privileges abused and opportunities wasted! How can these fears be removed? What shall medicine a sense of guilt, or still a fearful looking-for of judgment? I do not wonder that quietness

from fear of evil should be considered by philosophers the *summum bonum*; that deeply religious spirits should have tried in ways the most extraordinary and even repulsive to human nature to obtain it. I do not wonder that men should have mortified three-fourths of their nature and life, and should have submitted to scourgings, fastings, penances, and privations of all kinds, if only they could be kept quiet from fear of evil. I do not wonder that the Buddhist religion, which aims at bringing men to a state of complete repose, to a Nirvana of perfect peace and freedom from all annoy, should be the religion of the great majority of the human race. But in vain is quietness from fear of evil to be sought in ways like these. There are germs of evil in the air everywhere, and men catch the infection in the monastic cell as well as in the market-place, in the desert as well as in the city. And we shall never escape or secure immunity until we have obtained the needed prophylaxis—learned the Divine secret of peace.

There is only one way in which quietness from fear of evil can be got. The sacred writer solves in a single sentence the problem which philosophers have written huge tomes and spent years of thought and meditation in vainly attempting to answer; sets at rest

once for all the passionate longings that have agitated humanity in all ages. It is not in any way or by any method of our own that we are to get this unspeakable blessing, whose price is above rubies, for which a man would give all the substance of his house, and it should be utterly contemned. It is by the simple, easy expedient of hearkening unto God—an expedient within reach of all—within the power of the poorest and simplest. “*Whoso hearkeneth unto Me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil.*” What does hearkening unto God mean? The phrase is obviously one of those metonymical expressions which occur so frequently in the Bible, and which are characteristic of all Oriental languages, in which a part is spoken of as the whole. The ear is made the representative of the whole personality and life, and the hearing of the ear for the whole sum of human duty. The ear, the counterpart of the voice, is the most human of all our organs. It is by it that we hold most intimate communion with our fellow-creatures, and most powerfully influence each other. It is to the ear that the summons to awake to spiritual life is now addressed; and the summons hereafter to awake to eternal life will also be addressed to the ear.

What is meant by the phrase of the text,

then, is unmistakably this, that we cannot truly hear God's Word without being suitably impressed by it and following it out in all its requirements. To hearken to God is just simply to keep His commandments, and what does He command us? His first and great commandment under the Gospel is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved"—saved from all that causes men to fear. Sin is the source of all our fears and disquietudes. We fear our sinful selves more than any outward thing. Sin is the great, the only adversity—the only thing that is adverse to us; let it be removed, and all other things that we deem adverse will work together for our good. Let the evil in our souls be taken away, and we can confront boldly and bear calmly every external evil. God's first Gospel commandment is therefore addressed to our deepest and most urgent necessity. If we believe in Jesus His blood will cleanse us from all our sin; His righteousness will justify us from all our ungodliness; His Spirit will sanctify us, so that we shall be in harmony with the will that rules the universe, with the order and peace and beauty of all the worlds, and therefore we shall have no cause to fear. Jesus has taken away everything that has brought a shadow upon God's holy and happy universe. The inward sources

of fear are first removed, the dread of punishment, the pangs of an accusing conscience, the terror which makes the soul long to hide itself—all these are removed from us. The fear which causes a man to look upon God's holiness as his enemy, which makes a man anticipate not loving chastisement but dread vengeance, has no place in the believer's heart. This fear love casts out, because it casts out the sin which causes it. And if we are thus delivered from inward fears, outward fears will lose their power to alarm us.

If we hearken unto God we shall believe in His Son, who hath not only promised to save us at the end of our journey, but hath also promised to provide for us and to protect us by the way, who hath made a covenant with us, ordered in all things and sure, ordered in regard to things the minutest that concern our daily life, and who, because He withholds from us no good thing, hath said to us, "Let not your hearts be troubled, ye believe in God, believe also in Me." There are individuals who say that they have hearkened unto God, and yet have not been kept quiet from fear of evil, have not been in the least degree benefited in their worldly circumstances by their devotion. A man once told me that he had given up praying, for it was of no use—none of his troubles had been relieved, and things

were just the same with him as before he began to pray. But such individuals do not truly hearken unto God, they reserve their whole heart from Him, and give Him only the homage of the lip ; they seek Him because they desire to eat of the loaves and fishes and to be filled, and suppose that gain is godliness. Far different is the testimony of those who in sincerity of heart hearken unto God. They cast all their care upon Him, and can testify from glad experience that He careth for them, that He is faithful to or better than His promises. Numerous instances have shown that when it is best for them it is God's good pleasure to bless them with richest temporal blessings. And therefore they know that in all their distresses, however grievous to flesh and blood they may be, He does not willingly or arbitrarily grieve or afflict them. They are assured that all that can affright them is in the firm control of a wise and loving and Almighty Hand, the Hand that was nailed to the cross for love of them. They know that love cannot act contrary to itself. They trust God so entirely, so implicitly, that they lose all sense of fear. It is this perfect trust in God that we all need, for all fear is swallowed up in absolute self-surrender to His will. Whoso thus hearkeneth unto God will indeed be kept quiet from fear of evil.

This proverb, then, contains the highest theology, the truest philosophy. It turns our dependence upon mere material good to dependence upon spiritual good, from the possessions of earth to the blessings of heaven, from trust in mere things which we see and handle to trust in God whom we cannot see, but in whom we can believe. Our true happiness is independent of things if it be centred and poised on Him ; if the joy of the Lord is the strength of our heart. And hearkening unto Him we partake of His eternity and immortality ; our being ranges far beyond any evil that we dread. We are greater than all our trials. They are mere episodes in the eternal duration of our history. The evil that is anticipated is removed from the foreground of our minds, where, like the foreground of a photograph, it is out of focus and unnaturally enlarged. The trouble magnifies itself like a sort of inner lens. But hearkening unto God gives us the true perspective ; we retire to such a distance as to shrink our trouble back to its true dimensions. It is not a finality ; it is only a passing experience. Our true life went on before it, goes on underneath it, and will go on after it. It is only a little momentary shock in the vast whole of our existence which God has allowed to happen for a lasting higher good. It is this optimism of which

we have the quintessence in the proverb of the text, which is so different from the morbid despondency and the cynical stoicism in which the author of Ecclesiastes sums up his ideas of human life and of all human things. Not vanity of vanities, all is vanity, but the assurance that this world, despite all appearances, is God's world, and that righteousness and blessedness, in spite of every evil, will in the long run be established in it. And thus a fresh heavenly breeze passes through all things, turning up their brightest side, as a summer wind passes through a wood of poplars, exposing to view the white glistening undersides of the leaves.

Sometimes even when we hearken unto God He allows the fear of evil to haunt us, but then it is for the discipline of our souls. If we have really hearkened unto God, and striven honestly to do His will, and yet the fear of evil still remains, then we may be sure that God allows it for wise and gracious purposes. Have we ever noticed the curious fact that it is often the things we dread that never happen? The Russians have a proverb, "Life, like the ice, breaks when you do not expect it"; and a famous Prime Minister is credited with the epigram that "It is the unexpected that happens." Now why is this? May it not be that a salutary fear has a

natural tendency to avert the evil it anticipates? It implies the absence of that presumptuous confidence in prosperity which says, "I shall not be moved," and often the dread of an affliction produces the same effect upon the mind which the affliction itself would produce, and thus renders the bitter medicine needless, for the cure is wrought without it. If you have the fear of evil, then, and it accomplishes in you the purpose for which God sent it, He does not proceed to inflict the evil itself. He contents Himself with shaking the rod, as it were, in your face, letting its dark shadow fall across your path.

But let us remember that it is not from evil itself that hearkening unto God frees us, but from the fear of it. It is the fear of evil that, by God's help, we are to conquer; the evil itself is wholly beyond our power. Man is born to trouble by the same natural law which makes the sparks to gravitate upwards. Nothing can save us from the ills that flesh is heir to. There is no special, exceptional immunity from trouble promised or secured to God's people. Many indeed are the afflictions of the righteous. "In the world ye shall have tribulation," said Christ to His disciples. Bereavement and death come alike to all; and poverty and calamity come to many in spite of their faith and devotion.

Even the smoothest waves of time are perpetually wrecking something. But "Fear not," says Jesus, "I have overcome the world." He has taken the victory out of every evil, the sting out of every trouble. He has removed the fear of evil, and what remains can easily, by His grace and strength, be borne, and, indeed, accomplish blessed results in our experience. When the Indian takes the poison out of the cassava root, or out of the arrowroot plant, he converts the starchy substance that remains into wholesome and nourishing bread. And so, when we are free from the fear of evil, we can find in the evil itself a salutary discipline, a means of nourishment and growth in grace.

THE CHAIN OF NATURE AND
PROVIDENCE

THE CHAIN OF NATURE AND PROVIDENCE

“And it shall come to pass in that day, I will hear, saith the Lord, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth; and the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel.”—HOSEA ii. 21, 22.

SCIENTIFIC men speak of the chain of life, whereby all the different forms of life, from the humblest to the highest, from the moss to the oak, from the animalcule to the elephant, form but separate links, joined together by close vital relations. Darwin has given a most striking example of this chain of living forms, showing how the one is dependent upon the other, and that if one be lost or broken the whole chain is made useless. He tells us how the white clover in the neighbourhood of a certain town disappeared from the fields; and the reason he gives is that there were no bees to carry, in their search for honey, the pollen or fertilising powder from one flower to another. And there were no bees, because

the field-mice destroyed their nests and ate their honey and young grubs. And the mice had increased because the cats that would have kept them in check were themselves killed by the street-boys in the town, who took a cruel pleasure in exterminating those stray, harmless creatures. Thus the disappearance of the clover in the field outside the town was caused by the disappearance of the cats inside it. These two ends of a wonderful chain were united by intermediate links which most people would never have thought of, and if the one link was broken, all the rest were made of no avail. This striking correlation of forms and forces, producing results altogether different from any that one would have anticipated, is expressed in a very quaint and homely way, in the well-known nursery rhyme of "the House that Jack Built." As Shelley, with the far-reaching instinct of the true poet, says—

"Nothing in the world is single ;
All things, by a law divine,
In one another's being mingle."

All God's works are closely related ; and the Apostle Paul expressed a great scientific truth, which men have only found out in its fullest significance in these last days, that all things work, not separately, but *together* for good.

The Prophet Hosea gives a most remarkable example of one of these chains of connection between the things of Nature and Providence. The language is highly poetical. Dead things are represented as living and having the power of speech and personal action. This is in accordance with the faith of childhood, which believes that nature is not dead but living, that it is ruled not by physical forces, but by spiritual powers; a faith which grown-up people lose, but to which we need to be brought back if we are to realise that the whole of the world of nature is full of the presence of God, and that He moves and acts in everything we see. A picture is presented to us in the text of the whole process by which our food is procured. It leads our thoughts all along the chain of cause and effect from man, through nature, up to God.

Let us begin then by examining this wonderful chain at the most important point. Let us take the highest link first, contained in the words, "I will hear, saith the Lord." The earth is a gigantic phonograph, whose varied voices are communicated along the whole line of natural means to the ear of the Almighty. A great cry for help goes up continually from earth to heaven, from multitudes of creatures that have no language but a cry; and the Lord hears that cry, and His providence

gives them their meat in due season. He opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing. But in the text what the Lord is represented as hearing specially is the cry of the human beings whom He made in His own image, and endowed with dominion over the world. In the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer we are taught to ask that God will give us our daily bread. Our bodily life is one of incessant change. Day by day our bodies wear down with the friction of life, and portions of our frame become effete and are eliminated from the system. Day by day fresh material is found, exactly replacing the wear and tear of each day. And the means whereby this reparation is maintained is the assimilation of appropriate food, taken into the circulation in sufficient quantity and at duly regulated intervals. And for this continuous supply of food for our continuous necessities we pray day by day to God.

Now it seems strange that we should be obliged to have recourse to prayer for what appears entirely under our own control, and is the result of our own labour. The procuring of our own food seems more than anything else within our own reach. We do so much to produce and earn it, that we are apt to think of no other agency in connection with it but our own. And yet, when we are taught

to pray to God for it, we are taught the true source from which it comes, and our own helplessness and dependence.

We cry for food, and the Lord says, "I will hear." He knows that we have need of food, for He has so made us. He has created food convenient for us, and He has made provision in the arrangements of nature and providence for the supply of the food. He does not give it to us straight out of His own hands. He does not rain it down from heaven, as once He did with the manna in the wilderness. He bestows it upon us by intermediate agencies. God is emphatically the God of law; He always works by means and secondary causes. And He gives us our daily bread, when we cry to Him, not arbitrarily or capriciously, but by and through the wise and beneficent instrumentalities which He has appointed. The etiquette of the Spanish Court is so elaborate that in order to get the smallest service performed for her, the queen has to communicate through so many functionaries that sometimes the necessity for the service is over before it can be rendered. And in some of our own departments of state, a petition has often to go through so many officials, that it takes days and weeks before it reaches the proper quarter, or secures the desired answer. But the household of nature is no such circum-

locution office as that. Every instrumentality is carried on of God's direct working. He is the living personal source of every force and form, of every life and movement in the universe. He works not merely at the extremity of the chain, but, like the electric spark, His will traverses and pervades the whole range of cause and effect, and concentrates and glows at the point of action. Each link fulfils its own special and relative purpose by the power which He imparts to it. What Pope says of the spider is true of God's action all along the chain of causes, it—

“Feels at each thread and lives along the line.”

The corn and the wine and the oil hear the prayer of man; and the earth hears the prayer of the corn and the wine and the oil; and the heavens hear the prayer of the earth; and the Lord hears the prayer of the heavens.

He is the only Potentate, the great Executive by which the laws of nature are carried out. There is no inherent, essential power in any object or force of nature; power belongeth only unto God. The snowflake leads us to the sun, and our harvests lead us to God. It is He who crowns the year with His goodness, who makes the seed germinate, and the earth nourish its growth and the sun ripen its fruitfulness. Not by a winding-up clock-

work process, the accumulated force of which renders unnecessary any direct control, does He work, but by constant interposition all along the chain of causation from the first to the last link. What is this but a great process of evolution—evolution opening up to us a new and very wonderful vision of the way of God in the creation and in the ruling of the world? Evolution has been regarded with suspicion and dislike by the Church because it has been too much allied with scepticism. It has been too much regarded as a self-generating, self-controlling process, independent of Divine help. All Theistic ideas have been eliminated from it. But, rightly considered, so far from favouring unbelief, the doctrine of evolution is in reality a true exposition of the method of Divine providence, and gives us a more exalted conception of it. The words of the prophet show to us that the law of evolution, which is just God's method of working, plays a very distinguished part in the ordering of the varied processes of nature; and that all its details are simply the carrying out of the creative and providential word, "I will hear, saith the Lord."

Let us now proceed to go down this wonderful chain, and look at the second link: "I will hear the heavens." The heavens above us, which in themselves are mere empty

space, cry to God, and He fills them with the vital atmosphere, so marvellously compounded as to be suitable to the wants of every living thing. He distributes through it the poisonous carbonic acid gas, which is the food of plants, in such a skilful way that it cannot prove harmful to animal life, the one exhaling and the other inhaling it, and thus balancing each other; and by the currents of heat and cold produces the winds and the storms which circulate the air and keep it ever fresh and pure to minister to the necessities of His creatures. He fills the heavens too, in answer to their cry, from the same glorious luminary, with light and heat and chemical power, and diffuses them with exact adaptation to the requirements of the earth, giving more chemical power to the sun's rays in spring for the germination of seeds, more light to them in summer for purposes of growth, and more heat in autumn when the fruits have to be matured. He produces the seasons with their periods of rest and activity, and the alternations of day and night with their beneficent ministries. In the occurrence of the harvest moon which rises sooner after sunset, and continues to do so for more nights in succession than any other full moon in the year, we have a remarkable example of how God hears the

heavens, and makes what we are apt in our ignorance to regard as a disadvantage, in the shortening days of autumn, to work for our good. The old saying that "after Lammas corn ripens by day and night," is literally true. Every farmer must have observed how very rapidly the moonlight not merely whitens but actually matures and ripens his corn. Then again the heavens cry to the Lord and He fills the thirsty air with latent vapour to satisfy its insatiable drought and to prevent it from desiccating into mummies all vegetable and animal life. This vapour is always most abundant when it is most wanted by plants, that is in hot weather. It is condensed into clouds to shade the earth from the too ardent sunshine during the day, and to keep in its heat from being too rapidly radiated into space at night, and thus freezing to death every living thing. He balances these clouds most wonderfully in the blue sky, and sends them here and there on their missions of blessing. In all these wise and beneficent ways the Lord hears the heavens, and supplies them with what is essential to the life and welfare of all the creatures He has made.

Let us pass on to look at the next link in this remarkable chain: "The heavens shall hear the earth." The two elements of vege-

table life are sunshine and rain; and the earth calls to the heavens day by day for the due regulation of these two potent factors in the production of the harvests of the earth. There is nothing more wonderful in the scheme of nature than the way in which the waters of the salt and bitter ocean are employed to refresh and fertilise the dry and parched earth. There they lie side by side, the sea and the land, and the waters cannot cross the fixed line that divides them till the sun lifts them up in a vaporous form into the sky, where they form clouds, and the currents of air convey them to the mountain tops, and they discharge themselves as mists and rains and snows which are the sources of the rivers and wells and streams that make the earth green and fertile. The prophet speaks of the rain coming down, and the snow from heaven, and returning not thither, but watering the earth, and making it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater. And by the slowest and most continuous of all modes of motion in the glacier on Alpine peaks above the snow-line, and by the gentle, gradual distillation from leaf to leaf among great masses of quaking moss on mountain tops below the snow-line, the vapours of the sky in the loneliest solitudes return to

fertilise the distant fields of man. In those dry and parched lands, where the heavens are as brass and the earth as iron, the soil, cracked and fissured with the blazing heat, sends forth from each gaping crevice, as from a blistered lip, a cry to the heavens, and the heavens send down those timely rains without which everything must die. And on the other hand, the cold and spongy earth in northern latitudes, saturated with continuous rain, so that the grain will not ripen in the ear, and the sheaf will not winnow in the stock, and the crop is like to rot on the field, cries to the heavens for the warm sunshine to return, and the drying breezes to blow, so that her face may again smile with abundant fruitfulness. Thus God hears the earth when it cries to the heavens for sunshine or shower to make its fields green and golden with the food of man and beast. Meteorologists have told us lately how the raindrops are formed. The earth sends its dust up into the atmosphere, where it floats about at great heights. It there attracts and condenses the moisture that is hidden in the air or stored up in the clouds. And just as a crystal is started in a solution by a nucleus of foreign matter, so each particle of dust in the atmosphere gathers the particles of vapour near it, and

rounds them into a raindrop. Thus every raindrop requires a particle of dust to start it, and of course it takes the particle of dust down with it to the earth, and so purifies the air, and at the same time refreshes and fertilises the earth. Is it not a wonderful thing that the earth should send up to the heavens its dust, and that the heavens should send it down again in the form of the blessed and cleansing rain! God in this wonderful way hears the prayer of earth when it cries to the heavens, and makes its own dust, the very dust of its dry and parched thirst, to be the means of answering its prayer.

But let us look at the fourth link in the strange chain: "The earth shall hear the corn and the wine and the oil." How wonderful is the way in which the earth is prepared to grant the request of its own products! What vast machinery has been set in motion to form the fields in which our harvests can grow; the sea retiring and leaving dry land enriched with its fertilising material; rivers in their overflow depositing their sediment; volcanoes pouring down their lava streams, disintegrating, when cool, into the best of all soils; the glacier grinding down by its slow, heavy motion and pressure the strata of the earth into clay and mud; and the atmosphere

weathering the granite rocks into sand, which, by the decay of countless successive generations of plants growing in it, has been converted into rich mould ! How wisely have the materials of the soil been mixed so as to produce fruitful earth ! Were the soil all of one kind, all limestone, or all clay, or all sand, nothing could grow in it. But sand is found in every field to allow the fine roots of plants to penetrate into it, and to supply the flint which strengthens their stalks ; lime is also present to supply the elements of growth ; and clay to retain the moisture and give tenacity to the soil. And these ingredients are so happily blended in good soil that they do not retain too much moisture nor part with it too easily, and so regulate the degree of heat they acquire that the crop will not be too backward in spring nor too late in autumn. By the wise design of the Creator each corn-plant obtains its food from the soil by means of the tiny mouths at the end of each rootlet. And before the food can enter these little mouths it must be dissolved in water and then sucked in ; and the materials of the soil are so constituted that they can be readily dissolved and assimilated. God has also formed the stem and the leaves and the fruit of our food-plants in strict accordance with the weight they have to carry, that weight being regulated by the

attraction of the earth; and that attraction in its turn being in exact proportion to the size, density, and distance of the sun and planets. It is a striking thought that the whole mass of the earth, from pole to pole and from centre to circumference, is nicely weighed and adjusted to keep our freckled corn in the position best suited for the growth and ripening of its own grain. Thus the earth hears the corn, the wine and the oil, and produces for them the condition in which they can flourish. The seed is cast into the earth, and the earth helps it to expand and develop all its latent capabilities, and furnishes it with the materials of its growth, so that it brings forth fruit, in some thirty, in some sixty, and in some an hundredfold.

The last link in the chain is, that the corn, the wine, and the oil shall hear Jezreel. Let us put aside the wine and the oil—for these do not form part of our food in this western and northern world—and confine ourselves to the consideration of the corn alone. There are very remarkable things connected with corn. It is a constant theme of wonder how God has made the staple food of man to consist of the seed of an annual grass that grows and ripens and fades every year, and every season needs to be sown and reaped anew; how in the various corn-plants man finds all

the best constituents of nourishment and vigour ; how these corn-plants can be stored for a time of scarcity and transported without injury to the most distant places ; how some form or other of them can be cultivated in any part of the world ; and how, on the basis of security which they afford, a stable society can be built up by which the highest arts of life and the noblest forms of religion may be developed. The corn-plants require different conditions of growth. The weather that is fatal to the barley and the oats is life to the wheat. The wheat sends its root deep down into the soil, and through this tap-root it sucks up the moisture of these subterranean depths untouched by the sun's rays. Thus, a drought which can burn up the shallow-rooted barley or oats will not affect the wheat, which rejoices in the fiercest heat and produces the best crop in the hottest summer. We thus see that our mixed crops never get weather that suits them all alike. Plants adapt themselves by slow degrees to the climate and soil in which they are placed, and there is at length a complete harmony of correspondence between them. But we cultivate a number of different plants, with different constitutions and habits, under artificial conditions, and we force them into a brief and sudden correspondence with their environments ; and we do not

wonder that there should be at times a disastrous revolt. But it is astonishing, nevertheless, how the different kinds of corn-plants under our changeable skies yield to us season after season a more or less average crop.

The corn needs to hear our prayer year after year; for God has so arranged the supply of our food that the annual harvest of the world will only suffice for the world's annual necessities. There never was a two years' supply, or even a year and a half's supply, of the first necessary of life at one time in the world. Every year the barrel of meal is nearly exhausted, and no new supply can be obtained except from the fields that are slowly ripening under the patient heavens. As we approach the season of harvest every year the starvation which is often within a day's march of multitudes of the human family is within a few weeks of all. All the other riches in the world being based upon the riches of the harvest-fields, are as worthless without them as the notes of the banker without the real gold to represent them. And in having, year after year, to sow and reap our fields, and in thus having our daily bread measured out to us, and our daily bread only, we are taught in the most impressive way the solemn lesson of our entire dependence upon God.

We have thus examined link by link the remarkable chain of nature and providence described in the poetry of Hosea; and the conviction is forced upon us that it is God who hears not only the heavens and the earth and the corn when they call, but each one of us when we cry, "Give us this day our daily bread." It is He who, by the operations of natural law, makes the earth yield her fruit every year, so that there may be abundance for man and beast. It is He who, by the operations of laws of social economy—by the trades of the farmer and the miller and the merchant—brings our loaf of bread ready to our table every day. All these things are done by intermediate agencies—by the powers of nature and the energies of man; but the entire process is superintended and controlled and harmonised by the God of nature and of providence, who is, indeed, God over all, blessed for ever. And the Lord's Prayer teaches us, by the petition for daily bread coming fourth in the series, that it is only when we hallow the name of the great Father of all, and do what we can to make His kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven, that we have a right to ask for the due supply of our needed food and the assurance that we shall enjoy it. "Let the people praise Thee, O

God; let all the people praise Thee. Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us."

When the prophet says that the lowest link of the chain is Jezreel—"and they shall hear Jezreel"—he puts us in mind of the strange significance of that name. Jezreel was originally the name of the most fertile part of Palestine, the great granary and corn-field of the Holy Land, the plain of Esdraelon. It then passed to the city which Ahab and Jezebel made their capital, and polluted with the foul worship of Baal, and which, on that account, became accursed and was destroyed with a terrible vengeance by Jehu. But at last the accursed spot of the ancient dynasty drew down upon itself the Divine compassion; and the prophet Hosea was commanded by God to call his innocent child by the name of Jezreel, in token that he should live to see God's vengeance upon the house of Jehu for his ruthless cruelty, and that the name of the city and place which he destroyed should go back to its original signification as derived from the beauty and fertility of the rich corn-plain of Palestine, and be a pledge of the revived beauty and richness of Israel. "I will hear, saith the Lord; I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth; and the earth shall hear

the corn and the wine and the oil ; and they shall hear Jezreel." The lowest link in the chain of blessing is the old idolatrous city which God had destroyed because of its wickedness. He hears its cry of repentance, and He restores it, and brings back its abundance and prosperity ; and because it does the will of God, all things work together for its good.

And is that old act of mercy not full of precious significance to us ? The lowest link in the chain by which our yearly harvests are produced is sinful man. We have sinned against God's mercies ; we are unworthy of the least of them ; we deserve destruction from the presence of the Lord. We have done the very thing which drew down judgment upon Jezreel. We have worshipped the powers of nature—the Baal-god of material resources — and forgotten the Hand that has been feeding us. But notwithstanding, He makes His sun to shine upon the just and the unjust, and His rain to fall upon the evil and the good. We, sinful, unworthy as we are, cry to the corn, and the corn cries to the earth, and the earth cries to the heavens, and the heavens cry to God, and God hears and sends us our daily bread day by day, that His goodness and long-suffering may lead us to repentance. Let

us remember that we are kept in life by the forbearing mercy and undeserved goodness of God for two reasons—first, that we may turn from our sins to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Saviour, and then that we may serve Him and help to carry on His blessed work in the world. It is for this that the wonderful chain of natural blessings exists. And if by this chain of earthly blessings that concern our bodies our souls climb up to God's grace in Christ Jesus, then we shall lay hold of that still higher and more wonderful chain of spiritual benefits, link by link, and realise that He forgiveth all our iniquities ; He healeth all our diseases ; He redeemeth our life from destruction ; He crowneth us with loving-kindness and tender mercies ; He satisfieth our mouth with good things ; He reneweth our youth like the eagle's, all of which are yea and amen in Christ Jesus to the glory of the Father. And we shall pass upwards successively by the links of the golden chain which reaches from earth to heaven ; "for whom He did foreknow He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son ; moreover, whom He did predestinate, them He also called ; and whom He called, them He also justified ; and whom He justified, them He also glorified." In the case of each of us

may the chain of providence, by which our daily bread is secured to us, lead us to lay hold of the spiritual chain by which we shall obtain the meat that endureth unto everlasting life.

“O Thou, out-topping all we know or think,
Far off yet nigh, out-reaching all we see,
Hold Thou my hand, that so the topmost link
Of the great chain may hold from us to Thee ;

And from my heaven-touched life may downward flow
Prophetic promise of a grace to be ;
And flower, and bird, and beast may upward grow,
And find their highest linked to God in me.”

GOD'S WINNOWING

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“Thou compassed my path.”—PSA, cxxxix. 3.

IF you will turn to the marginal reference of this verse in your Bibles, you will find that the word in the Hebrew original for “compassed” is “winnowed.” This is a pictorial word, and calls up before the mind an image which helps to illustrate the meaning of the verse in a most interesting manner. The mere compassing of our path by God is an elementary, commonplace truth which requires no argument or proof. It needs only to be stated to be at once fully understood and accepted. It is a truism which loses very much the power of truth through our familiarity with it. But when we substitute the winnowing of our path by God’s dealings with us, we have not in that case a commonplace fact, but a most suggestive and instructive metaphor. The worn-out, defaced coin of speech is minted anew, and comes

forth glowing with the beautiful image and superscription of the thought which the psalmist meant to convey to our minds.

Harvest operations in the East are much simpler than they are in our country. They are all carried on in the open air, for the weather at that time of the year is uniformly fine. When the corn is reaped it is not piled into stooks, or gathered into barns, as with us, but threshed on the spot, on some piece of rising ground, beaten hard and smooth and exposed to the wind. I saw one of these threshing - floors on the top of the Mount of Olives ; and such was the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite on the summit of Mount Moriah, which became afterwards the site of the Temple of Solomon. The sheaves are heaped on this spot, arranged in a circle, and over them are driven rude, heavy sledges of wood, having their under surface stuck full of sharp pieces of hard basalt. Oxen are yoked to these sledges, and a man stands on them to increase their pressure, while another man drives the oxen round and round upon the sheaves until they are mashed to pieces, the straw being broken and crushed, and the grains of corn separated from it.

When the grain is all threshed out in this manner, the heaps of mixed corn and broken

straw are tossed up before the breeze with a shovel; and then the grain, being heaviest, falls straight down, and the broken straw and chaff being lighter is carried by the wind, and forms a heap a little farther on. The corn that is threshed and winnowed in this primitive fashion cannot be expected to be as pure as it is when it has undergone our elaborate processes. But the people of the Holy Land are accustomed to this state of things, and each family sifts the corn from the refuse in a sieve when they have occasion to use it for grinding in the hand-mill and making the household bread.

This explanation will make perfectly clear the allusion of the Psalmist: "Thou compassesest, or winnowest, my path." It refers to the oxen going round and round on the sheaves laid on the threshing-floor in order to separate the corn from the straw and chaff. In like manner, the Psalmist, by a bold figure, represents God going round and round our path by His dealings with us in providence and grace, in order to purify our nature, and to separate the good from the evil, the things that are precious and enduring, like the grain, from the things that are withered and dead, like the straw, or light and worthless like the chaff. God humbles Himself to do for us the work which the oxen

do for the corn. We are valuable to Him as the corn is to the husbandman. How patiently do the oxen plod on hour after hour, going their constant round, treading down the corn until their task is accomplished. And so how patiently and unweariedly does God compass your path with His providences and gracious dealings till He has fulfilled in you the good pleasure of His goodness, and prepared you for being presented faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.

Life to every one is a common round of continual beginnings and endings. Each day is a little circle returning where it began. Each year is only a wider circle linking on its last day to its first. We live within the same limited, circumscribed horizon. We have to perform, day after day, the same actions, to repeat the same duties, to go round and round in the same routine of daily tasks. Our range is as narrow as that of the ox that treadeth out the corn among the heap of sheaves. And all this is apt to become monotonous and wearisome. Some are so consumed by ennui that life has lost all relish for them; and some have grown so tired of pacing the irksome daily round that they have put an end to it by violent means. But surely it gives a new zest to life if we

realise that all this constant doing of the same things, this constant going round and round the same little circle of daily duties, is not a treadmill penance, a profitless labour, like weaving ropes of sand, but is designed to bring out and educate to the utmost perfection of which we are capable all that is bright and most enduring in us. And surely it heightens the interest immeasurably to be assured that God has not merely ordained this long ago as part of His great providential plan for the world, but that He is daily and hourly superintending the process of our discipline and education by His personal presence, compassing our path, going round with us in the circle of life's toils and duties, and causing all our experiences, by His blessing, to work together for our good.

There are some, indeed, who think that this idea of God compassing their path is oppressive. They shrink from it. It contracts their being and depresses their energies. They have not room or freedom to do as they like. You have seen a ripe apple that has been kept in the store-room over the winter until all its juices have evaporated, and its skin has become dried and wrinkled, and it has shrunk in size to a fourth of what it was. Take the wizened apple, and place it under the bell-glass of an air-pump; and as you withdraw

the air that presses on it from the outside, the air within itself causes it to expand, smooths out its wrinkles, and makes it once more the plump, round apple that it was when you newly plucked it from the tree. A similar effect, they suppose, would be produced upon their being were the oppressive compassing of God about their path removed. They would be free to live, they think, a larger life. They would no longer be crushed by a sense of constant obligation and claim exercised upon them by a Higher Power, and would be left unhampered to follow the impulses of their own thought and to grow at their own sweet will. They would move more easily under their own indulgent eye than they could under the strict eye of Divine, unbending righteousness, and they would become higher beings in their own estimation, just as the withered apple blooms out again under the exhausted receiver. But this is a vain expectation. This imaginary freer and larger life would be like that which Satan promised to our first parents when they ate the forbidden fruit. A heavier burden would press upon them than the compassing of their path by God. Their life would be made still narrower and poorer without Him. The apple swells mechanically only, with its own internal gas, and not with

the fresh juices of life. It is empty and without substance. And so is the life from which the conscious pressure of God upon it is removed. To be without God in the world is to be without hope. There may be the appearance of living, but the soul is dead.

We cannot wonder that the thought of God compassing their path should produce such an effect upon those who desire not the knowledge of His ways, to whom He is a stranger, or who think of Him only with terror as a tyrant and an oppressor. But it is far otherwise with those who know God in Christ Jesus as their reconciled Father, their watchful, tender, and unfailing Friend, whose gentleness makes them great, and all whose purposes and dealings with them are full of loving-kindness and tender mercy. They are guided by God's eye and stimulated to do their best in His service. And so far from being restricted and repressed, their natures expand and improve under His benign discipline. It is not an enemy that compasses your path, quick to find fault and severe to punish. It is true that our Lord on one occasion spoke as if an evil power were the cause of our winnowing. He said of Peter, in whom He discovered the fault of pride and stubbornness, from which he needed to be freed by a severe and humbling process:

“Satan hath desired to have thee that he may sift thee as wheat, but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.” And we are expressly told that Job, God’s servant, was delivered over to Satan that he might tempt him and test the steadfastness of his righteousness, or the disinterestedness of his faithfulness to God. But Satan’s power is limited. He could only work under God, who controlled all his afflictive dealings with His servant, and permitted them only to go a certain length, so that they might purify and elevate, but not destroy. And so God makes use of the evils of the world, of evil men and evil things, to test and prove His own people. He allows trials and temptations to come by means of which they may be sifted and purified.

You sometimes think that He presses too heavily upon you in the sorrows and misfortunes of your life, that they almost crush you to death. But He has assured you that He will not suffer you to be tried above what you are able. He knows the frailty of your frame. He has bestowed upon you in the gift of His own Son a guarantee that He will withhold all unnecessary trial, and regulate the trial that He sends for your good. He will correct thee, as He hath promised, *in measure*. He who weighs the mountains in

scales and the hills in a balance, in order that the good of His creation may be promoted by their exact weight, will weigh all your trials and troubles, and adapt them graciously and tenderly to your necessities. I was very much struck during a recent summer with the effects of an unusually long continuance of dry weather. The streams everywhere shrank to the lowest; but I noticed that there was on the surface of the deepest pools an exceptional quantity of green scum. Most people would call this a filthy thing; but in reality it consists of the most beautiful threads of plants under the microscope. And the purpose of this scum is to purify the water and make it fitter for the use of the creatures that live in it. In spring this green scum lies in long, silken plumes at the bottom of the clear, full, rejoicing streams. But in summer, when the streams shrink under the hot sun, the scum floats on the surface; and it protects the water from too rapid evaporation, prevents as far as it can the shrunken stream from shrinking still lower, so that the creatures in it may be preserved. Now is not this a striking proof of God's tender mercies over what many people would call the meanest of His works? And shall He deal less tenderly with the beings He has made in His own image, and redeemed by the blood of

His only Son? "When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee." He will not go round on your sheaves with His heavy dispensations oftener than is required to separate the chaff from the wheat; and you may be certain that not one grain of good in you will be destroyed, not one element of lasting benefit will be injured—only the chaff will be blown away and the straw removed.

In our country the winnowing process after the harvest used to be done indoors in the barn by means of a primitive machine called "fanners." Except in old-fashioned farms, this machine is seldom seen nowadays. It has given place to an instrument driven by steam or water power which carries out all the processes of threshing and winnowing at once with the utmost expeditiousness. I remember often, when a boy in my father's barn, turning round by the handle of the fanners the big wooden fan inside, which by its motion created an artificial wind, blowing away from the confused mixed stuff from the threshing-floor, poured into its funnel the chaff and broken bits of straw, and passing through the clean, assorted grain in a heap by itself. This instrument is very ancient in its form and use. It is a legacy from the Romans, and was called by them *tribulum*. It is from the Latin name of this

instrument that our English word *tribulation* comes. The early Christians compared a trial or trouble to a passing through the tribulum or fanners, in order that by it their nature might be winnowed, that they might be sifted as wheat, and all their chaff blown away; and therefore they called it a tribulation when it had that effect. They said that "we must through many tribulations enter into the kingdom of God"; and they were taught that this was not an evil but a good, that sanctified affliction to the believer was gain and not loss. It was a tribulation that separated the precious from the vile, that purified the nature of the believer, but preserved himself unhurt for the heavenly garner.

It often happened that one turn of the fanners was not enough to completely winnow the corn. A good deal of chaff and crushed straw was still left in it. In that case it had to be put through again in order to make it perfectly clean and fit for the market, or for the mill to make bread. And so God, the good Husbandman of souls, often acts. He puts His grain more than once through tribulation in order to winnow it effectually. Many are the afflictions of the righteous; for He takes His fan in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor. But

never forget that it is a wise and loving Father who is compassing your path with tribulation. His storm of trouble is not against yourselves but against your sins, not against the wheat in you but the chaff. The law of His Kingdom is that nothing shall enter it that defileth. Repeated winnowings are therefore indications, not of God's displeasure, but of His solicitude in preparing you, by such sifting discipline, for a more abundant entrance into His heavenly kingdom. Oh, how much of chaff, how much of vanity and selfishness and worldliness, and other base, worthless elements, are in the best of us! You need that God should compass your path continually; that He should winnow you effectually, so that the fruits of righteousness in you should first be pure and then peaceable. You say of things that are seemingly against you, that distress, or disappoint, or impoverish you, that they are your cross; but no trial can be your cross unless you are crucified with Christ by it, crucified to the world and the world to you, and know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings and sorrow because of sin, with that good sorrow that worketh repentance unto life. You speak indiscriminately of any annoyance, or trouble, or evil as a tribulation; but it is obvious that no trouble can

be called a tribulation unless it has the effect of winnowing your nature and purifying you from all your chaff—purging you from all dead works to serve the living and true God in newness of life.

“Thou Searcher of all hearts, look down and see,
Not if the chaff doth most abound in me,
But if there be a tithe of grain for Thee—
A tithe for Thee, in all the unfruitful place!
All the day long before the winds of grace
My chaff upriseth in Thy patient face.
My lying down, my path, my ways how poor,
My wasted moments' husks bestrew my floor;
And still Thou searcheth by the garner door,
Content to stoop if so upon the ground
One grain of truth, one ear of love be found,
So doth Thy patience, dearest Lord, abound!”

THE BLAMELESSNESS OF IGNORANCE

THE BLAMELESSNESS OF IGNORANCE

“And they understood not the saying which He spake unto them.”—LUKE ii. 50.

“And they understood none of these things.”—LUKE xviii. 34.

WHEN our Lord's parents found their Son in the Temple, and He explained to them the reason of His conduct, and it is said “They understood not the saying which He spake unto them,” we are apt to suppose that this was a time of temporary unbelief or forgetfulness—when the mist of long familiarity with Him in the lowly home and amid the common, everyday surroundings of Nazareth had obscured the impression which they must have received of His supernatural character from the portents of His birth. And we easily find fault with them for their fickleness in so quickly losing sight of what should have been always before their eyes, and should have always deeply impressed

them. And yet to whatever extent their ignorance and want of comprehension may have been culpable—and very probably they were not without blame, as they did not open their eyes fully to the light they had, or act consistently with the opportunities they enjoyed—when we consider the subject more deeply, we feel that it was not altogether an evil that they did not fully understand the wonderful things connected with Jesus, or realise His Divine nature.

We know in natural things how admirably adjusted man is to his environments on earth. He is placed exactly in the position and circumstances best suited for him. At a certain distance above the earth the air is too rare for him to breathe; at a certain distance below the surface of the earth the atmosphere is too dense. Beyond a certain point, at either pole of the earth, he ceases to be a civilised being. When the climate is too cold or too hot he is unable to develop his full capacities, and sinks into the condition of a savage. Even his senses are attuned to his present condition. The measure in which he possesses them is admirably fitted to the functions and enjoyment of life. More sensitiveness would cause constant pain. Were our hearing increased, we should have more acute suffering; were

our vision made microscopical, we should be afraid to move. Thus man, we see, is placed in circumstances and furnished with endowments that are exactly balanced to his requirements. We have reason to believe that similar wise adjustment was made between our Lord's assumption of our nature and the circumstances in which He was placed. Supposing, for the sake of argument, that our Lord's true character had always been perfectly known, and the full impression necessarily produced by it had always been exactly felt, what would have been the effect of this? What should we expect to find in the home, and in the conduct of Joseph and Mary? In astronomy, Neptune, the outermost planet of our system, was discovered before it was seen in the telescope by the perturbations which it produced upon its nearest neighbour, the well-known planet Uranus. Unseen and unknown, this far-distant object disturbed the familiar star, upon which the astronomers gazed, in its orbital motions. How much greater should we expect would be the perturbations produced upon His creatures by the bodily presence of the Creator fully unveiled among the ordinary scenes of human life—the most stupendous of all miracles. Would it be possible that God could be seen and known

by men, walking habitually among them and sharing their experiences, and the life of man run on in its accustomed channel? Could the probation of man continue? Would not obedience in such a case be compulsory. Would not faith lost in sight lose all its value, and religion be the mere mechanical result of an overwhelming spectacle?

If Jesus had been fully known for what He truly was—the Divine Eternal Son of God—a constant awe, an overmastering sense of the supernatural would have depressed every one who lived with Him. The balance of life would have been completely upset. ~~There would have been no leisure or calmness of mind for thought and reflection. An over-~~whelming observation would have engrossed and swallowed up everything else. Human beings could not live an ordinary, natural, everyday life in such close association with the heavenly world. Even in the case of ordinary mortals like ourselves, how does a visit from those whose rank or intellectual gifts are far greater than our own disturb us and derange the usual tenour of our life! If the King were to come to our home, and we knew that he was the King, even though he laid aside all the trappings of royalty and adopted the simplest mode of approach to us, we

should not feel at ease in his presence; we should speak and act under a sense of restraint. Such in a far higher degree would have been the effect produced upon the parents of Jesus if they had clearly and fully known always that the Son of the Most High God had come in human nature to live in their humble home at Nazareth. How could they treat the Divine Child as their own son, exercise authority over Him, as parents do to their children, require from Him the obedience and respect which children are accustomed to give to their parents? The position would have been reversed; it is they who would have revered their Child, and not He them. They would have stood in awe of Him; and thus there could have been no true, natural, spontaneous home life in their dwelling. Everything would have been strained by this tremendous knowledge.

We may believe, therefore, that it was a merciful and all-wise Providence that partially obscured with the veil of natural, ordinary life the brightness of the revelation which had been vouchsafed to Joseph and Mary; that their eyes should be holden in order that they might not clearly and fully recognise who He was. We may believe that it was for a great and good purpose that they were allowed to forget the wonderful

things they had seen and known regarding Him at His nativity, and that the impression produced by these was suffered to become dim and faint with the lapse of ordinary, uneventful years. Jesus was to be like unto us in all things. He was to grow and develop physically and morally according to the laws of our nature. It behoved Him, the perfect Man, to be also a perfect Child. But if Mary and Joseph had possessed a distinct and clearly-defined consciousness that Jesus was different from all other human beings, it is obvious that this would have been a most disturbing element in their relations to Him, in the position in which, according to the divine plan, Jesus had to be placed. The Divine Child could not have developed naturally and quietly in a natural and quiet home. It was part of His humiliation that His glory should be shrouded, that He should come under the laws and limitations of ordinary human growth. And it was part of His parents' fitness for training and educating Him, under the influences of their home, that they should not understand His saying when He spake of His Father's business. In order that Jesus should be a true Child, and have a true father and mother, and grow in stature, and in wisdom, and in favour with God and man, it was necessary that

His parents should only gradually and dimly see His heavenly glory. Ignorance in such a case was bliss. It had a good and beneficent side. It acted the part of the cloud that veils the too ardent sun, and allows the earth to grow calmly and slowly. Jesus was to be no youthful prodigy; He was to grow naturally by a slow, gradual, normal development. He was to traverse all the stages and experiences of life, childhood, boyhood, youth, and manhood, and to touch all that was universally common to humanity in each. He was to rise to His full stature like the Temple of Solomon, in solemn noiselessness, without any marvels or miracles, without any disturbance of the ordinary quiet village life in Nazareth, and this He could not have done had He manifested Himself clearly as the Divine Being that He was, and had Mary and Joseph comprehended always His Divine nature, and understood the full meaning of His own saying, "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?"

And as it was with our Lord's parents, so was it with His disciples. They were in a similar condition; and their relation to Him required a similar accommodation. Ever and anon we are told that these things understood not the disciples at first. We read that as He was going up to Jeru-

saalem for the last time, and He revealed to them the design of His terrible journey and gave them a clear glimpse of the mystery of redemption, "they understood none of these things, and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken." Can we accuse the disciples then of sin, of culpable moral obtuseness, of not knowing the things which they ought to have known? To us, looking back with the added light of the finished gospel, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and the expositions of eighteen centuries of Christian history, upon the words and actions of our Lord on earth, all seems plain and easily understood, and we marvel at the ignorance and want of comprehension of the disciples. We wonder why they failed to recognise the Divinity of their Lord and to understand the gospel of His grace. We imagine that if we had been in their room we should have believed in and adored the Divine Saviour, and seen in the very lowliest signs of His human nature only the deepest reasons for worshipping Him as God over all blessed for ever. Why, then, did not the disciples understand? Just for the same reason that Mary and Joseph did not understand. Had Jesus manifested Himself to His disciples in all the glory of His Godhead, had they seen His face

radiant with visible Divine light every time that they looked upon it, the relation between them as Master and disciples would have been impossible.

Look at the effect produced by the few transient glimpses which they received of His glory. Peter obtained a revelation of His infinite Majesty at the first miraculous draught of fishes, and he shrank from Him as One too holy and too awful to associate with frail, erring mortals: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O God." The disciples got a lightning flash, on the way to Jerusalem, of the transcendent mysteries that were about Him, and of the terrible shadow of suffering into which He was entering, and they were amazed, and as they followed they were afraid. The multitude that came with swords and staves to take Him in the Garden of Gethsemane beheld for a moment the awful beauty of the Godhead flashing out upon them, and they were appalled, and fell back to the ground. The disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee were so overpowered by the vision of His resurrection glory, even though it was shrouded in the old familiar form, and they recognised Him to be indeed their old friend and Master, that they durst not ask Him any question. John at Patmos, when he saw

Him walking in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, with His countenance like the sun in its strength, and His voice as the sound of many waters, fell at His feet as dead, and Jesus had to reassure him and lift him up. And Paul was dazzled and blinded by the radiance of the heavenly light that shone around Him, exceeding the sun in its noonday effulgence, on the way to Damascus. If this had been the constant experience of the disciples instead of being rare and exceptional, there could have been no freedom of intercourse between their Lord and them. They could not have sat at the feet of such a Being and learned of Him; and He could not have instructed them according to His own favourite method, given them knowledge as they were able to receive it, and light according to the opening of their eyes. They would have been too much overwhelmed by the awe and the wonder of His presence to get any real or permanent profit from their association with Him. If in the end it was expedient that He should go away that observation might give place to reflection, it was a wise arrangement when He was with them that they understood not the sayings which He spake unto them, and did not realise the true nature of their Lord. All this He

mercifully hid from their eyes, in order that calmly and quietly and gradually, without any unnatural forcing, they might be taught by their Lord the great truths concerning His person and Kingdom.

It was not, therefore, altogether a sin that the disciples did not understand His sayings while He was with them, and were not so impressed with the grandeur of His Divine Majesty as we should have imagined. When He had occasion to blame them for their ignorance, it was with a gentle sadness, as when He said to Philip, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?" The veil of flesh mercifully hid Him from their view, and the common associations of familiar, everyday life softened the splendour of His Divinity; and by this gracious treatment they grew not as in a forcing house, but in the sweet, calm, open air; and amid much perplexity and dimness of apprehension, the conviction was growing within them that He who went in and out among them was more than a teacher, and they were prepared for the full-orbed revelation that came with His resurrection and ascension that He was the Son of God and the Saviour of the world.

And does not God act in the same way

regarding ourselves? It may seem paradoxical to say it, but ignorance and forgetfulness are often great blessings. The limitations of our nature are often helps to us instead of hindrances. We should like to see things clearly and fully; but God mercifully causes us to see through a glass darkly and to know in part, and has arranged that things should be sometimes forgotten, and never or very seldom produce upon us their full impression. To remember even God Himself habitually—to think that He is seeing and judging every thought and action of ours, would have a paralysing instead of a stimulating effect upon us, and would altogether dry up those fountains of innocent mirth which overflow and cheer our souls and gladden our toil. We should be perpetually distracted by an awful, overpowering consciousness. There is, therefore, nothing wrong in our human forgetfulness, if the slightest temptation to a sinful thought or word or deed puts us instantly in remembrance of that Divine omniscient presence, to act as a check upon us. In our mixed state ignorance is necessary as well as knowledge, darkness as well as light. We could not see at all if it was all light. Many of our duties if they do not result from our ignorance are

enforced by it. "Watch, for ye know not the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh." The early Christians thought that Christ was coming in their day, and therefore they looked out continually for Him; they neglected their duties, and did nothing else but gaze up into heaven, and thus they drew down upon themselves the stern rebuke of the Apostle Paul for their idleness. And if we knew the exact time of our Lord's appearing, we should be tempted to act in the same manner. We may be very sure that if heaven were now fully laid open to our view, it would be so impressive and engrossing that everything here would be rendered insignificant and uninteresting, and we should be loosened and detached from all our present engagements, while our bodily senses would be injured if not destroyed by the disclosure. We have not power to bear that exceeding great and eternal weight of glory now; and flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. The converse also would be true. The full revelation here and now of the future world of punishment and suffering would be equally paralysing and would produce a slavish fear; and the constant realisation of death and all that it implies and involves would place us under a fearful bondage, incapacitating

us to live out the life which God has designed for us.

What is necessary, then, to be impressed upon the mind by these reflections is that our knowledge of Divine things is wisely adjusted to God's requirements of us. We are not meant or made to have such a full and distinct revelation of spiritual and eternal things as will paralyse and overpower us; as will prevent us from growing up calmly and quietly and gradually in the Divine life. God does not want to dazzle us and enforce conviction by a revelation which we cannot but receive. He does not care for a mechanical belief that is produced by such compulsory means. He wants us to walk by faith and not by sight, to grope and search for clearer and fuller light; and therefore He hides the full glory of the truth from us. He surrounds the work and person and life of the Lord Jesus with a system which allures our further search. We feel that He has many things to say to us which we cannot bear now. We are lured by the beauty of His person and life to find in them new beauty and grace suited to our need. And this endless expectation has an endless charm. As long as life has something to learn, life is interesting. Those who wish to destroy all mystery in the world are striving to kill their own happiness.

And how blessed it is, upon the same principle, to be with Him whose character we cannot fully comprehend, whose sayings we cannot fully understand, and who thus keeps our love for Him real and vivid by the mystery in which it is enshrouded.

But while much is hidden from us, enough is revealed to shape our character and conduct. While we cannot fully understand as yet the things that belong to our peace, we can understand them sufficiently to accept and act upon God's method of grace. With all our deficiencies and limitations we are not unfurnished with the degree of knowledge that is needed to make us wise unto salvation. God makes Himself known to every human heart in a way sufficient to gain that heart, if there is no wilful ignorance and unbelief to prevent. The parents of our Lord did not fully understand who Jesus was, but they understood enough to do their duty by Him, and His mother hid all these sayings in her heart. The disciples did not comprehend fully the Divinity of their Master, but they comprehended enough to profit by His teaching and to fit them for the apostolic office when the full revelation came. And so we do not fully understand the mysteries of grace; and God does not blame us for this ignorance; it is part of our training; it is the condition

in which we are prepared for knowing more ; but He would have cause to blame us indeed if we did not *realise* what we do know and live up to it. One religious truth understood, taken in, realised, is worth a score of truths only repeated by rote. How much have the wisest and holiest saints yet to learn ! How much beyond the depths of the most advanced Christian are the truths of salvation, the unsearchable riches of Christ Jesus, the love that passeth knowledge !

A SIGNIFICANT PURCHASE

A SIGNIFICANT PURCHASE

"And I bought the field of Hanameel my uncle's son, that was in Anathoth, and weighed him the money, even seventeen shekels of silver."—JER. xxxii. 9.

ONE of the most striking incidents in the life of the Prophet Jeremiah occurred during his imprisonment in Jerusalem. His cousin Hanameel came one day with an offer to sell to him, as the nearest of kin, the ancestral plot of ground at their native village of Anathoth. This place was a sacerdotal settlement, and the fields around it belonged to the priests as their heritage. It was given to them for a possession on account of their sacred functions, as the Dewar's Crofts at Killin and at Kilmun in Scotland were given to the hereditary custodiers of the crozier of St. Fillan and the staff of St. Mun. Ecclesiastical lands, according to the Mosaic rule, could not be sold to a stranger, and thus alienated from the tribe

of Levi, but a portion of them might be given or sold by one member of the tribe to another. Barnabas, we are told, was a Levite, and he sold his land and brought the money and laid it at the apostle's feet; but he was only transferring a possession from one religious use to a higher and more satisfactory religious use, for the apostles of Christianity were to him the lawful heirs of the Levitical priesthood.

In the Levitical household at Anathoth Jeremiah was born; and as the nearest heir of the ecclesiastical patrimony, his kinsman Hanameel appealed to him to purchase it according to the provisions of the Jewish law. It was a strange thing to propose, and a strange time in which to make the proposal. Jeremiah might have replied to his cousin in the forcible language of rebuke which Elisha addressed to Gehazi when he came back with the presents which he got from Naaman by misrepresentation: "Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards and vineyards, and sheep and oxen, and manservants and maidservants?" The army of the Assyrians was on the march to besiege Jerusalem; they were ravaging all the country before them. The whole land trembled at their approach; the terrified inhabitants, abandoning in wild haste their

fields and homes, rushed for security into the fortified towns. Anathoth lay on the great northern road to Jerusalem, about four miles distant from the city, in the direct path of the conqueror; and the fields around the city of the priests would soon be in possession of the enemy, and would be pillaged and destroyed.

In this desperate extremity Hanameel urged his cousin Jeremiah to take off his hands a property that was exposed to such terrible risks. That ancestral farm had been in his family from the conquest of the Holy Land by Joshua. It had been apportioned to his line by God's own appointment, and registered in the great Doomsday Book of Holy Scripture. It was the most precious possession of an Israelite, and was the last thing he would part with, losing his life itself rather than losing it; for it was this farm that was his charter to an inheritance in the Land of Promise, and his right to be numbered among God's covenant people. ~~Notwithstanding these solemn sanctions, however,~~ Hanameel wished to part with this significant property in a panic of hopelessness. The bargaining spirit, so natural to a Jew, prompted him to sell it rather than give it away. In such a time of disaster the property would be greatly depreciated in value. He could not

expect to get the full price for it ; indeed, it was hardly worth anybody's while to buy it. But still, he might as well snatch some fragment out of the universal wreck.

One can readily understand what a highly speculative business this was, and one can therefore appreciate the noble disinterestedness of Jeremiah. He would not buy the property at a depreciated value. He would not take advantage of Hanameel's necessity, of his anxiety to sell during a time of panic, to get a cheap bargain. He ^{have} would give the full price for the property. What a wonderful confidence he had in God's faithfulness to His promises ! It seemed at the time as if the end of the covenant people had come ; as if Jerusalem and the Land of Promise, with all their sacred institutions, were to pass away from them for ever, and to become the possession of their enemies. Every prospect was gloomy in the extreme. There seemed no hope of deliverance. And yet Jeremiah, with prophetic foresight, looked beyond the impending calamity to happier times ; and with all the forms and technicalities of legal conveyancing, as if the times were perfectly prosperous and assured, he purchased the field of his fathers from his faithless kinsman. And then, in a splendid oration, half prayer and half exhortation, he proceeded to show

that this private domestic transaction was an acted parable of wonderful and far-reaching significance; for the purchase of his own ancestral field was an earnest of a coming time when every field in the land should be possessed in the same way, and the people should again sit each man under his own vine and fig-tree, with none to make him afraid.

With this most interesting incident in sacred history, there is a parallel incident in Roman history. The Carthaginian forces under Hannibal, everywhere victorious in Italy, were encamped beyond the Accio, about three miles from Rome. There was great alarm in the city, men's hearts failing them for fear, and the prospects of the Romans seemed at the blackest point. Yet in that time of universal despair, when all seemed lost, there were a few brave patriotic spirits that, like Jeremiah, never flinched and never gave up hope. And they exerted themselves, like him, to reassure their despondent countrymen. One of them bought from the owner, who had escaped for his life into the city and abandoned his home and fields, at its full value, the very ground on which Hannibal was encamped, in token that Rome was not to be conquered, and that the land around it was as valuable a possession as ever, and

would be sure of future occupation and cultivation by the rightful owners.

At the very commencement of Jewish history is recorded the significant purchase of the cave of Machpelah by Abraham, the father of the faithful. That was a wonderful transaction, considering the circumstances in which he was placed. The whole Land of Promise was in possession of the aboriginal inhabitants; and he to whom it was promised was a pilgrim and a stranger within its bounds, owning not a foot's breadth of its soil. But strong in his reliance upon God's word, he bought the field, and laid in it his dead, and thus took possession of it in the most sacred manner, in full assurance that the whole country would yet belong to his race. An incident similar to these remarkable Bible instances recently occurred in Scotland. Through the extravagance of the last Marquis of Hastings, the extensive estates of the family in England were lost. But his sister, the late Countess of Loudon, to whom was secured the property in Scotland, made vigorous efforts to retrieve the fallen fortunes of her house, and succeeded before she died in buying back a large portion of the ancestral inheritance. By a clause in her will she directed that when she was dead her right hand should be cut off and buried in Donning-

ton Park, Leicestershire, and the spot marked by a stone bearing the inscription ; "I byde my time," which was the ancient motto of the great house of Hastings. And accordingly her right hand now lies interred in the old family possession in England, as an earnest that although at present in the hands of strangers, it will yet revert to its original proprietors.

And is there not in our own religious experience in these days something that answers to the action of Jeremiah and of these faithful witnesses? We live in times of widespread unbelief. The very foundations of our faith are, in many quarters, being removed. Our Zion is besieged by hostile armies that cry as of old, "Raze it, raze it to the ground." The enemies of the faith once delivered to the saints are assailing it with plausible arguments drawn from the remarkable discoveries and theories of science. The treasure which our fathers have handed down to us has been thrown into the crucible of hostile criticism, and in the residuum we can find little of the precious ore. We are urged to part with much which past ages believed, and to which they attached the highest value ; to give up a creed that is old and worn out and effete, and unsuitable to the times, that has no solid ground to rest

upon, and that can yield us nothing but disappointment and despair. Shall we, then, in these troublous times, when so many are capitulating and giving way to the foe, part with our spiritual patrimony—with that which constitutes our dearest and most precious possession? No; we shall not act the faithless, cowardly part of Hanameel! We shall, like pious and faithful Jeremiah, buy the truth and sell it not; for nothing that we could get in exchange would satisfy us; the whole world, if we could gain it instead, would not compensate us. We shall hold fast the profession of our faith to the end; for no other faith—no scientific or philanthropic creed—could make up to us for its loss. We shall keep, God helping us, that which our Saviour has bought for us with His own precious blood. His blessed gospel is indeed a treasure hid in a field. We have discovered its inestimable worth, and for joy thereof we have sold all that we had, and bought that field that it might be ours for evermore.

Paul counted all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, sold all that he had, renounced his trust in his own blameless legal righteousness, in his spiritual and fleshly privileges as a Jew, that he might win Christ and be found in Him.

And we too have found it easy to part with the most precious things we possessed when we had the joy of God's unspeakable gift, and learned the value of the unsearchable riches of Christ Jesus. We have been made priests unto God and the Father by Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood ; and we have got this priestly portion, an inheritance among them that are sanctified, and we are begotten again unto a lively hope of the inheritance that is incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away—reserved in heaven for those who are kept by the power of God unto salvation. And with these immortal possessions of the soul nothing can induce us to part. Gold and silver did not purchase for us the blessings of grace ; and no gold or silver, or corruptible thing of earth, can buy from us that which constitutes the seal and charter of our redemption. We have succeeded to a great tradition of Divine truth, to which all the intervening ages have borne witness, whose grand principle is stability, and upon whose substance, however its forms and organisations may vary in adaptation to the requirements of each age, is stamped the seal of finality. Into that impregnable citadel we shall retire, and find there strength for faith, and power to stand in the evil day.

The Hebrew Christians were tempted, like Hanameel, to sell their spiritual inheritance in a time of great persecution and distress, to give up their Christian privileges, and go back to the beggarly elements of the Jewish faith, from which the truth as it is in Jesus had set them free. Living amid the splendid ceremonialism of the Temple worship in Jerusalem, the Jewish converts were in danger of imagining that by the profession of the Christian faith they had cut themselves off from the magnificent traditions of their race; and therefore the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews comes, like a second Jeremiah, to warn them of the peril of allowing themselves to be carried back to the bondage of the old law, and so forgo all the higher things they had gained by becoming Christians. They themselves were the true Israel of God, the real children of Abraham, the heirs of all the promises made to the fathers. They had bought by their faith the priestly ancestral inheritance, as an earnest that all the trials of their faith and patience would pass away, and the time would come when the Christ whom they worshipped should obtain the heathen for His inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possessions, and they themselves, having overcome the temptation, should sit with

Him in His throne, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And the Spirit of God speaks to all who are tempted in the same fashion to part with their inheritance of the Christian belief in the panic and unsettledness of the times. We read that a silver set of the sacred vessels of the Temple was made by order of the Jewish king, instead of the golden service which had been carried away into Babylon, and this in spite of Jeremiah's assurance that the golden vessels themselves, in God's good time, would be restored. The citizens of Jerusalem disbelieved the prophet, and gave up all for lost, and they condescended in consequence upon lower and meaner substitutes for the consecrated vessels. And so many give up the golden vessels of the true faith for lost when the sceptic and the unbeliever seem for the time to carry them away, and seek to content themselves by substituting earthly things for heavenly, the comforts and successes of material life for the blessings of the eternal world. They abandon the ancient creed which had bred heroic men and women who had conquered themselves and the world for Christ, and drift into some new and vague system of religion, which may have a great deal of sentiment in it, but denying the supernatural,

eliminating the atonement, disbelieving in the resurrection, is powerless to change the heart and save the world. To all such the warning comes that the golden vessels will be brought back again. They are only removed for a little, to try their faith and sincerity. It is better to do without them while earnestly seeking after them, than to make substitutes for them in materialism or agnosticism. Better far to pine for the absent and unseen Moses in the cloud than to find consolation in the golden calf—the work of your own hands. Your most precious possessions remain in reality untouched, and are yours as much as they ever were, if you have only discernment enough to see them and wisdom enough to retain them.

Hold fast, then, that which you have, that no man take your crown ; for in quietness and confidence shall be your strength. We hear men speaking of the loud roar of the receding tide of faith on the sands of time, which is filling all the air. But if the tide of faith ebbs for awhile, it will assuredly flow again. You have seen in a shallow, isolated pool on the seashore, a little shell-fish left high and dry by the receding tide. It suffers discomfort and hunger, and shrinks into itself when deprived of its usual element and exposed to the cruel sun and the withering air.

But the eternal laws of nature are in its favour ; the revolution of the earth round its axis, and of the moon round the earth, will help it, and it has a guarantee in the unfailing regularity of these great laws, that the tide will return and overflow its rock, and feed and bathe it with its life-giving waters. And so you, like that seemingly disregarded shell-fish, may be left for a little by the tide of religious hope to pine in a cold and faithless world. But the eternal covenant of God is on your side ; the faithfulness of the great Creator that is unto all generations is pledged on your behalf ; and “one common wave of thought and joy lifting mankind again” will return and bathe your soul with its gracious overflow. “For a small moment have I forsaken thee ; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid My face from thee for a moment ; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer.”

And what a wonderful hopefulness flows from all these considerations — hopefulness which is not only a source of comfort, but the source of all energetic work for God ! Doubt and fear paralyse action ; but when there is a sure hope of triumphant results the heart is stimulated and the arm is strengthened to sustained and vigorous

exertion. Hopefulness is the great characteristic of the gospel. A hope which maketh not ashamed is its central principle; it never despairs of the future of the world, and therefore it is urged to perseverance in the face of every obstacle. He who has kept the great truths of our salvation inviolate amid the persecutions and infidelities of the last nineteen centuries, will keep them inviolate to the end, however the prejudices of men may distort them, or the ignorance and unbelief of men resist them. "We believe that in the doctrines of Christ and the apostles we have the final revelation of God to man; that these doctrines and none others are for all time; that it is the will of the Lord Jesus to preserve unaltered the old faith, even until the last trumpet sounds." And this divine persuasion encourages us to work on calmly and steadfastly, assured that our labour will not be in vain in the Lord. You all know the familiar Scottish legend, how King Robert the Bruce, when dying, gave orders to the bravest and most trustworthy of his nobles to take out his heart, after his death, and carry it to Palestine to be buried in its hallowed soil. Enclosing the precious deposit in a silver casket, and suspending it from his neck next to his own heart, the noble chief proceeded on his arduous journey,

accompanied by a retinue of gallant knights. Passing through Spain, he found himself hard pressed in battle by the Moors, and, snatching the casket from his neck, he flung it into the thickest ranks of his enemies with the exclamation, "Forward, heart of Bruce, as thou wast wont; Douglas will follow thee or die!" And with this he spurred his horse into the midst of his foes, and perished nobly in his effort to regain his treasure. And so our Lord has flung, as it were, His own heart in advance of all our efforts at home and abroad in His cause. For the salvation of the world He died on earth; for the salvation of the world He lives in heaven. This is the object that lies nearest to His heart. This is the great enterprise, the hope of which He holds as the dearest jewel of His treasure. He has taken possession with His heart of love of all the ends of the earth; and as He has thus anticipated us in all our work of faith and labour of love, it is our duty to follow the leadings of His heart, and to press forward through the most formidable foes that withstand us. We are the Lord's free army; and our Christian life is a volunteer service to help Him to lift away the sin and misery of the world. Not to defeat and death do we follow Him, as that great example of love in despair, the doubting

Thomas, imagined when he said "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." No, but to assured victory and to life everlasting, exclaiming with Paul when he stood in fierce, pagan Rome, face to face with death, and was assured that the glorified Redeemer would keep the deposit of the Christian faith in His own safe keeping in spite of the death of its ministers and the varying fortunes of the Church, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day."

PERSONALITY AND IMPERSONALITY

PERSONALITY AND IMPERSONALITY

"There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores."—LUKE xvi., 19, 20.

(WHY did our Lord in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus give us the name of the beggar and not the name of the rich man? Why did He speak of the rich man in vague, general terms as only a *certain* rich man; and why did He ~~condescend to particulars in regard to the beggar, and actually mention his name?~~ We should have imagined that it would have been just the reverse,) that He would have emblazoned the name of the rich man in the honours of fame, and consigned the beggar's name to the obscurity of his lot on earth. That is what the world would have done. Judged according to the standard of society, the rich man, with his splendid house and grand appointments, and rich dress, and luxurious food, was a person of name and consideration. (When a

man becomes rich in our country he becomes a somebody; he is, perhaps, made a peer, if he has made himself useful to his political party, and his name and title and lineage are recorded in the book of the peerage and in the almanacs of the land. Every one knows his name, and is proud to acknowledge him and do homage to him. But when a man is poor he is a nobody. ~~Whatever his gifts or merits may be, nobody knows him; nobody is interested in his doings. He may go from home, or do anything he likes at home, and nobody cares a straw. He has no friends, and no name that is known outside his own humble dwelling. That is the way of the world.~~

But with Christ it was quite different. He reversed the standards of the world. He bestowed His patents of nobility not upon the rich but upon the poor. He said, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of heaven." He began His public ministry with the strange words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Himself poor, He associated with the nameless poor. (It was the common people, with names unknown and undistinguished lives, who gave Him His best welcome. He knew well from His own experience the "short and simple

annals of the poor,") And, therefore, when He gave a name to the beggar Lazarus, and passed by the rich man without a name as only a certain rich man, he acted entirely in keeping with His well-known custom and the rule of His life. The condition of the rich was foreign to Him; ^{and} but He could understand and sympathise with ^{their} ~~the~~ condition ~~of the poor.~~ He had a tenderer and more considerate spirit toward them, just because of ~~their poverty.~~ If others despised and rejected them, He would honour them for their simple virtue and rugged honesty. He would minister to their humblest necessities, and give to their sore experiences a deeper meaning and a higher value, and connect them with the blessedness of heaven.)

But it was not merely because of our Lord's sympathy with the poor ~~rather than with the rich~~ that He discriminated in this remarkable way between the rich man and Lazarus. The reason lies deeper than that, and touches the very foundations of human nature. Our Lord, by naming the one and leaving the other nameless, wished to show that it was the character and not the condition of the two men that distinguished them. The rich man was just a rich man, and nothing more. He has been called "Dives," but that is simply the ~~Greek~~ ^{Latin} word for rich. It is not an in-

dividual, but a generic name; the name of a class, not of a person. It applies to every rich man without distinction, not to one man exclusively.

There has been recently a very singular application of photography. By taking and combining by a process of super-position a succession of photographic likenesses of the different members of a family, a single portrait is ultimately produced, which is not the exact likeness of any one of those photographed, and yet is a likeness of them all, a family portrait in a very literal sense, in which the resemblance of each member cannot fail to be traced. We have something like this in our Lord's portrait of the certain rich man in His parable. We have not the likeness of any particular man, but the likeness of a class. The individual is lost in the class. The rich man had no personal likeness, no particular name, because he had no individuality. He was simply one of many, without any personal characteristics to separate him from the class with which he was associated. His sole distinction was that he was a rich man. He was simply made of money, to use the popular expression. Apart from his wealth he was a nobody. He reminds us of lairds and farmers in Scotland, who are called not by their own personal names, but

by their farms or estates. It is their farms or estates that give them consequence in the eyes of their fellow-men, not their personal qualities. (In many of our rapid streams there is a very slender kind of worm living, called a caddis-worm. It gathers round itself a compact case of little bits of sand and gravel and sticks and any substance that happens to float past that it can lay hold of. In this case it hides itself, and attaches itself to the bottom of the stream and resists the force of the current. This case is many times the size of its own body ; and when you pull it to pieces, and reach the worm in the inside, you are surprised to find how thin and small it is ; how little living material there is at the heart of all this great mass of sand and gravel and sticks. And so it is with the rich man in the parable. It is the riches with which he is encased that swell out his life and make his petty insignificant being bulk so largely in the eye of the community, and take such a firm hold of the world.) His life indeed consists in the abundance of the good things he possesses. The meat is more than the life, and the raiment more than the body.

(On the other hand, the poor man must be known by his character, or not at all. He comes out of circumstances, naked, clear cut,

with outlines well defined, like a figure in perfect relief, like a statue that stands on a pedestal surrounded only by the empty air, not like a cameo that is carved out of a shell or a gem, and is seen only against the background of that material, and owes most of its beauty and perfection to it. We judge a poor man by what he is, not by what he has. The early Tuscan painters painted their portraits on a golden background, and that golden background was the same for each person. There was no difference in the gilding that haloed each face, and there was apt, therefore, to be little difference in the faces themselves. The face of one man or woman painted on such a mechanical metallic background was like the face of another. Such faces were beautiful, not so much in themselves, but because of the beauty of their background, and that beauty was tame, monotonous, and meaningless. But afterwards, when a higher art came in, and the background was painted with a brush, and was made to correspond with the character of the face, and was painted in lights and shades to suit the play of the features, then there was a special meaning and individuality in each face. You could not mistake the portraiture. It suited the person represented and no other. And so

with the poor. (Their portraits ^{of 15 poor} are not painted on the gilded background of worldly prosperity, but are made to stand out, by the inequalities of fortune, against the dark background of toil and want and poverty. Their human nature is their sole possession, and its character is clearly and distinctly outlined by the hard discipline of their lot. Their poverty has made them what they are; and whatever worth or virtue their life owns has been given to them by the toils and trials through which they have passed.)

(We see in the rich man of the parable the common characteristics of a rich man. His good things were his clothing of purple and fine linen and his sumptuous fare. He valued these outward, material things above the inner, spiritual things of his true life. Even religion itself was for him chiefly a thing of outward form and show. Obviously he conceived of religion as an addition to his respectability, an outward, becoming ornament of his life. And as these things are all outside of a man, and do not touch his real nature, so in proportion as he yields to these habits and cultivates these qualities, does he lose his individuality; he gains the world, but loses his own soul; he has no name, but is known as a certain rich man. And when he dies he leaves all his posses-

sions behind him. He is stripped of the body he has pampered and the treasures he has amassed and the forms he has worshipped, and enters into a world of spiritual and eternal realities with which he has nothing in common, and for which he has made no provision.

On the other hand, we are led to conceive of Lazarus as caring more for the soul than the body, valuing human life as a scene of spiritual discipline and growth rather than of sensual comfort and enjoyment. And when he died the name of Lazarus, ~~which means "God is my help,"~~ and all that it implied was carried with him to heaven and was continued in the future life. ~~He was known by it in Abraham's bosom among the saints in glory. His individuality consisting in the gaining of his own immortal soul, not in the possession of earthly perishing things,~~ suffered no change ~~by death or~~ by the transition to the future world.

Poverty has a tendency to make a man a man, and to give him a name; while riches have a tendency to obscure the man in his wealth, and to identify his name with his possessions.

And this is just the lesson which our Lord wished us to learn from His omitting the name of the rich man and giving us the

name of the poor man. Jesus reverses the standards of the world by the standard of the sanctuary; shows to us a glimpse of the real values of things—what they shall be in the eternal world, when we shall no longer walk in the vain show and deceitfulness of things that perish in the using. It is not what a man has that God values, but what a man is.

In the House of Commons the names of the members are never given. They are always alluded to by the name of that part of the country they represent—as the Honourable Member for Greenock, or the like; their personal character is lost in their official; they are all put on the same honourable footing. And it is only when a member commits a serious fault that the Speaker has recourse to the solemn and trying ceremony of naming him, making known the offender by his own personal name, and affixing the stigma of condemnation to it, thus separating him from the community he has disgraced. And something like this was what our Lord did when, on account of Peter's forwardness in the matter of paying the tribute money and thus compromising his Divine Master by making Him subject to this tax like any ordinary Jew, He called him by the name of Simon. He had fallen

from his spiritual faith, and had relapsed for the time into the natural man; and Jesus in consequence used the name which Peter had received from his earthly parents, instead of the new name given to him on his confession of faith. *(There is a*

~~And this incident shows to us the~~ Divine significance ~~of~~ ⁱⁿ a man's name. It is just himself—his true being and individuality—and depends upon what he is in himself. To him that overcometh, says Christ—overcometh not merely the hostile circumstances opposed to his well-being without, but also his own easily-besetting sin, the inward lusts that war against the soul, all that in him is opposed to God's holy will and has a tendency to degrade his nature—to him that overcometh will I give a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving him that receiveth it; which fits him and him only in all the world. And hence it is that the believer receives a new name when he is converted, and becomes a new man—born again. Abram becomes Abraham—Simon becomes Peter—Saul becomes Paul. The greatest word which God can speak to His children is what He said to Moses, "I know thee by name." ~~To be known by name to~~ an earthly monarch is an honour which

worldlings strive after; it sets them at once in the front rank of the elect men of the State. (To be known by name to the King of heaven is the highest glory of a spirit; it sets the spirit at once in the front rank of the universe, among the elders, whose place is nearer the throne than that of angels and archangels.)

(The higher a creature is the more individuality it has. The nearer an animal comes to ourselves, the more it associates with us, the more it is individualised. We do not name our sheep, because they do not dwell with us, and they are a mere flock. One sheep is like another. We name our dog, because he has a character and is closely associated with us. And so ~~the nearer we come to heaven~~, the more closely we are associated with Him in whose image we were made, the more individuality we have. The Christian is truly the only man that has a name, for he only in the full sense is a man. He is lifted ~~out of the world~~, ~~and~~ above the world, into personal relations with God.) He is a partaker of the Divine nature, escaping thereby the corruption that is in the world through lust. He is not under the law, but under grace. He is the king of circumstance, not its subject; and all things work together for his good.

The order of St. Lazarus was in mediæval times one of the most esteemed and chivalrous knighthoods of Italy. The highest in the land were proud to enrol themselves in this order, pledging themselves to put aside all selfish luxury, and to help even the most loathsome form of suffering. A society also arose in the seventeenth century called the Society of Lazarists, who ministered to every form of poverty and distress; and one of its members was St. Vincent du Paul, whose name is associated with every form of benevolence, and whose memory is held in highest reverence throughout Christendom. These things show to us that the name of Lazarus has been perpetuated even on earth with highest honour, while the name of the rich man is forgotten. We are fast hastening to a world where the inequalities of this world will be rectified and readjusted, and where it is not our circumstances but our character that will determine our destiny; not whether we are rich or poor, but whether we have faith and love towards the Lord Jesus Christ; whether we are spiritually minded or worldly minded. *is only, if* ~~If~~ we have Christ formed in us as ~~the treasure~~ of our soul, ~~and~~ the hope of glory, ~~then~~ *that* ~~all that constituted~~ our true being and individuality will pass with us through death

into eternal life, and Christ will confess our name before His Father and before His angels. If we have no saving interest in Christ, then we carry no name or possession with us into the eternal world; when we die, that day our very thoughts perish.

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